



# THE TRACKS WE TREAD

G. B. LANCASTER

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# The Tracks We Tread

BY

G. B. LANCASTER

Author of "Sons o' Men" and "The Spur"



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## GLOSSARY OF NEW ZEALAND TERMS

- Biddy-bid—a burr.  
Brumbies—wild horses.  
Keas—meat-eating mountain parrot.  
Koradi-stick—blossom stalk of flax.  
Kowhai—timber tree  
Lawyer—trailing thorny vine. (“Wait-a-bit.”)  
Makutu—a wizard’s curse.  
Manuka—small scrubby tree. (Scrub.)  
Matai—black pine.  
Matakuri—a thorny bush.  
Mic-a-mic—scrub.  
Moko-moko—bell-bird.  
Mopok—native owl.  
Musterer’s hut—shepherd’s out-station.  
Mutton-bird—species of petrel.  
Nigger-head swamp—loose tussock growing on stems in  
swamp.  
Pakeha—white man.  
Papa—soft blue slaty rock.  
Raupo—bull-rush.  
Rimu—Timber tree. (Red pine.)  
Tawhina—resinous shrub.  
Tiki—a charm carved by Maori in shape of a grotesque  
man.  
Tohunga—Maori wizard.  
Toi-toi—native pampas grass.  
Totara—very large tree.  
Tussock—rough bunch-grass, characteristic of New Zea-  
land.  
Tutu—poisonous plant.  
Whanae—slender flowering tree.  
Whare—hut.  
Wild Irishman—thorny bush. (Matakuri.)



THE TRACKS WE TREAD



# THE TRACKS WE TREAD

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## CHAPTER I

ROUND the New Zealand coast-lines lie the towns, where men talk with their kind from over-seas, and put their fingers, eagerly and very ignorantly, on the throb of the great world's pulse. Up the New Zealand mid-line—sheer into her vivid young heart—lie the townships where draw together the men she breeds and holds; men whom the Salvation Army lassies pray for on the dusty street corners, and who go away many times to endings unchronicled; men who love, who conquer and serve, on the downs, the harsh mountains, the unhandled plains, until they make touch with the Men of To-Morrow upon her shores.

Here they too feel the world's pulse for a week, a year. Then the flutter and the drum-beat sicken them, and their feet ache for the spring of the tussock again. So the saddle takes them back, and the pick, and the call of the sheep, and the tin-roofed townships, whither all roads set as wheel-spokes set to the hub.

The roads round Argyle in Otago South slept, in their dust or their mud, six nights in the week. On Saturdays the boys from the run came in to distract Murray, who was police officer for thirty square miles of district, and to turn the five hotels inside out, putting them together again in the dawn-fog.

"Scannell's lot" held the foremost reputation, from Binnie away north to the Shark's Tooth, and beyond it. For Mains was a cattle station primarily, and Scannell was merciless to shirkers. And so, without any exception, were Scannell's men.

It was on a wet Thursday in August that Mackerrow broke his leg and was sent to the hospital fifty miles away. It was on the Friday that Scannell's teams creaked down the steep road to the township, unloaded sheep and rabbit skins at the siding through a blue-cold icy day, and filled up Blake's bar-parlour afterwards. Tod was angry with Mackerrow, and he said so.

"I'm runnin' couples wid Randal, now," he said. "An' Randal is not me pick at all. You remember what I tould ye last musterin'?"

Last mustering Tod and Randal had found a man—long dead—on the highest, cruellest peak on Mains Run. Tod had whistled his dogs off the bones, scraped a hole on the sunny side of a slope where the snow lay soft, and shoveled the ugly things in. Then he called

upon Randal to say a prayer. But Randal said no more than "Rot," and went downhill with his dogs abroad on the shingle behind him. Tod dropped on one knee, and uncovered.

"May ye sleep swater than ye smell," he said. "An' may your luck be better to ye than that ould boyo shankin' away beyant there."

Then he crossed himself, and followed downward through the loneliness.

Gordon grunted through the smoke-reek.

"I knew Randal long afore that," he said. "He got all the bowels of an empty churn, and all the heart of a seeded cabbage. I cud tell you things of Randal——"

Randal was without in the bar. Mogger saw the square of his shoulders beyond the door-jamb, and kicked Gordon's stool in delicate warning. For Gordon was only a sluicing hand and did not know the weight of Randal's fist.

"Go an' tell it top o' Lonely Hill, then, you chunk. We knows what Randal is."

Ted Douglas knocked out his pipe with a chuckle. He was a long, well-knit boy, and head-man to Scannell of Mains. For where power to rule is in men, age and length of tenour break before it. Besides he was strong, body and brain, and clean as the snow hills that bred him.

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“Do you?” he said, dryly. “You’re clever! Do you know what Randal is? Do you know what any on us is?”

“Don’t tell it,” prayed Danny, pushing Conlon off the accordeon, and slipping his own hands into the slings. “It’s a five-day sermon, reekin’ wi’ samples, and berginnin’ wi’ Lou——”

“Who went down to Jerusalem and fell among thieves,” clicked in Lou’s light, refined voice from the corner where he took down an outsider at Nap.

“Bedad, ye needn’t go seekin’ to Jerushlum for thim,” cried Tod—“wid th’ shirt stole off the back of me to putt on Moody when he goes to see his girl. Why don’t ye buy wan of your own wid the pennies ye take out of the Church-plate, Sundays?”

“’Twas nothin’ more’n a necktie, anyways,” said Moody, unabashed. “Not ernuff ter pin me collar to, an’ dirty at that. Does they on’y hev ha’pennies at Chapel then?”

“Buttons,” said the Blacksmith, and Danny chanted softly:

“‘We are all brothers in this land o’ dreamin.’”

The Packer woke with a snort.

“I knows what Randal is,” he said suddenly. “He’s them sort as wants a ’ole pack-’oss to hissself, and won’t balance up into a decent



load wi' ornary men. There's lots o' them knockin' round. Lou's another."

Lou shot a swift glance across the room. No man ever saw behind the blue of his eyes or the smile of his well-cut mouth.

"Who's going to balance up with us instead of Mackerrow, Ted?" he said.

"Jimmie Blaine," said Ted Douglas, shortly.

All the township knew that Ted Douglas and Jimmie were mates. And all the township knew the meaning of Lossin's remark:

"Are yer takin' him on a chain an' a collar fur next time yer goes after cattle?"

When the Packer was sober he attempted to shoulder every quarrel in Argyle.

"Jimmie's bin after cattle on Behar. He won't carry the collar-galls on his neck as long as you're doin'."

Randal swung through the room as Lossin sprang to his feet with an oath.

"Stop that," he said, and struck Lossin's arm down. "If you want to hit your grandfather, go and nose round the work-houses till you find him."

"One degeneration's enough fur any man," said Danny peaceably. "Where would he find a grand-dad? I ain't got one meself."

"I'll sell you a brace fur ten-pence," offered Mogger, who wore rags the year through that he might feed his relations. "And a granny, too, ter make it up to a bob."

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“Thank ye,” said Danny; “but I’m thinkin’ o’ startin’ at the other end. Shove ’em on ter Moody. He’ll never get a wife havin’ on’y had ten gels a’ready.”

“Revoke,” said Lou, from his corner, and the outsider stammered in helpless innocence.

Conlon winked at Gordon as he cast more wood on the fire. Lou’s methods were known in the township.

Randal dropped on the form beside Derrett, and spread his long hands to the blaze. They had been a gentleman’s hands before the nails broke and the joints coarsened by work. And Randal had been a gentleman before the life he chose had made his soul even as his hands. But the blackened hands and soul had pulled Mains out of more than one tight pinch when the snow was down on the sheep-country.

The air without rang with frost, and the eternal thump of the dredges a half-mile down the river sounded close to each man as the beating of his heart. The bar-parlour was hot, and gay with the fire-blaze. It smelt of the stables, and rank tobacco, and beer. A man who came quick-foot down the street to swing the side-door open, halted on the sill to gasp and to shout:

“Who’s in there behind that reek? Any chaps who can ride?”

Derrett felt the quiver of the man beside him, and saw it flick to one and another

throughout the room. It was the muscles of the saddle-bred tightening unconsciously, to strike them out from loafer, and dredge-hand, and ganger.

"'Bout half on us," said Douglas. "What's the row, Murray?"

Murray's blue uniform and clean-cut face showed under the door-lamp. He had left an English University for love of adventure; and, from cap-peak to spurred heel, all the district knew him for the honourable plucky gentleman the Old World breeds, and sometimes sends us.

"Young Scannell's gone up the Changing and into the hills. I'll want all of you I can get to find him."

Randal sprang up with an oath as Conlon cried:

"Drunk again, is he?"

"I believe you! Rouse up, you fellows. Who's coming?"

Tod scratched his nose, answering for them all, dubiously.

"Ah, then, man dear, wouldn't it be better for the boys to let him go streelin' away to the ind of the world and beyant it, sure?"

"Come out of that, you lazy beggar, before I bring you by the scruff."

Then, as the warmth held the men still in idleness, Murray's voice changed, and cut with a sudden incisiveness. "Is it a pack of cowards I'm calling on in here?"

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“By Gad!—come along out of this, boys, and we’ll show him! Up the Changing, is it? And I’ll give you a lead. Have you got a horse that’ll stand up on this country, Murray?”

It was Lou Birot’s clear voice above the grate of turning feet, and of forms that fell all ways. Lou had carried his swag into Mains last year—no man knew whence nor why, and he did not tell. But the nerve which everywhere commands respect from men was in Lou a balanced finely-tempered sword, and “Scannell’s lot” revered it, forgiving his other sins.

“Hold on!” cried Ted Douglas. “Who’ll take the drays home?”

“You and Moody. Head and tail. That’s easy. Where’s Blake? Can he let us have horses? Get out there, Roddy——”

“Bluff!” cried Scott. “It’s the ‘coward’ nicked you, Lou. But you ain’t playing my hand. I pass.”

“One funk among Scannell’s men,” said Randal, diving into his oilskins.

“Funk be hanged! If young Art hadn’t got a sister you wouldn’t——”

Douglas tripped Scott headlong as Randal’s left shot out, and three more punted him into the passage and slammed the door. Then, as the tide of feet set to the stable, Steve said with a gasp:

"Fust time ever I see Randal fleshed. Is there truth in that yarn, after all?"

The boys charged out, sweeping Blake and a lantern with them. A half-dozen seized such horses and gear as he owned; more raided Phelan's stables and Conroy's at the corner. Jingle of steel, hoof clatter, and the volleys of chaff brought the township to stare and ask questions. A white face showed in a stray lantern-flash. Douglas gripped the shoulder below it, and said:

"Not you, Jimmie. You don't know the country."

"They brought me, Ted. They said I was one o' you now——"

"You go back in the drays with Moody—take that scared look off before you show up at Mains."

Douglas cast on his gear, and wheeled out, two lines quick and deep on his forehead. For that instinct beyond reason which joins or divides men apart from their understanding had knitted him to a mate weak in body and spirit, and he knew the unbending code of Scannell's men.

Lou came over the fence, his feet seeking the stirrups. He had borrowed a half-broken colt from Jackson, and Jackson hobbled after, babbling uncared-for warnings.

He flung the roll-call along as he raced up where the street clanged like rock to the hoofs:

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and the answers came, crisp and gay, and eager, for the tingling of frost and of fight held the boys.

Murray's eyes were bright in the dark as he rounded his troop.

"Fifteen! And all sorts of cattle and gear! Good on you, boys! Take the running, Lou. You've got a genius for this kind of thing."

Steve loosed a great oath on the night.

"There ain't no heel-taps when Lou's shout-in' drinks. What's Art Scannell to pay over this, Murray?"

Murray's brown face was suddenly hard as his voice.

"The last inch I can grind out of him. He gives more trouble than any man in the district."

Randal caught Lou's stirrup. He said underbreath:

"If you find him—he's not Murray's meat."

Lou's laugh was blue flame in his eyes. Here was a game to his hand; for Randal was a rider also.

"If I find him, he is. Wake up there, boys. Wheel out."

He settled home in the leather with the light poise of one born to it, and slung the half-mad colt forward, firm-handed and easy.

The sharp air bit faces and hands, sending the blood in a gallop to the heart, and swaying fear and reluctance aside. For each type

takes its pleasure in kind; and each man, the world through, would at one time or other uphold his private courage through payment forced thereby from another.

"We has my sympathy," said Danny, plunging into the dark. "All on us 'cept that blazin' comic in the lead. Give Lou a little bit o' Hell-fire ter play with, an' he'd feed himself into the flame fer the fun of it."

"Get out," said Steve. "Father Denis calls him the flower of the flock. I won't deny as he's a pretty rank bloomer when he's set in a soil that suits him—Mogger, if that ole broken-winder o' yours expects ter fin' oats in my pocket——"

"He was lookin' for suthin' green fur a relish," explained Mogger. But he was not there when Steve's fist shot out.

Derrett's shop rose at the corner, and Lou swung to the left, up a side-street where the young moon hung ahead. The creak of leather and the anger of chilled horses under the bit brought a bellow from a low cottage-door.

"Hallo, bhoys! Liftin' cattle tu-noight?"

Murray turned in the saddle to answer, and Lou cried:

"Father Denis—say a mass for his soul if we find him."

The hoofs passed, and the priest stood still, his fat chin shut into his hand. He knew men;

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by the hang of their coats, and the way they have their hair cut, and by the things that they do not do; and his religion was broad as his brogue.

"The soul that sinneth," he said. "An' Lou Birot afther it wid that voice tu him. Bedad! the divil will have a foine whipper-in when Lou comes tu his own. Ah, me bhoys; we're growin' intu men, bhut there's plenty of the brute in us yit."

He went back to the still little room that knew half the sin and the joy of the township; and far off, through the vivid clear night, Lou led the chase for the soul that had sinned.

Trees and clumped houses showed up and passed; planking came under-foot with a shiver; down stream and up blinked the red-eyed dredges, and from the right came the squeal of hydraulics. Beyond, tall cliffs slewed the track at an angle, and Murray cried:

"You can get us up the Changing, Lou? We'll lose hours if we follow the road."

Lou chuckled. For the animal instinct of following a lead is stronger when other forces are numb.

"Yes; and at top—if you're game."

"Hear that!" cried Mogger. "At top—up the Changin'—hear that——"

"Stow it," said Danny savagely. "Think we're all deaf if we ain't got ears the size o'



yourn? We got ter wipe that suckermantal hint o' Murray's out on him, an' you can bet all your fambly we're goin' ter do it."

Lou's colt was raw and too eager. But he had been bred on the high country beyond Changing Creek where Art Scannell's black mare ran last year.

"And it's there she'll go back," said Murray. "With young Art atop of her while there's life in him. Drunk or sane, you can't shake him off anything with hide on."

The air stank of mud and wet flax; the grate of shingle came under the hoof, and Tod's gelding slipped on smooth ice where the star-reflection was faint.

Lou dropped his cheek to the mane, his blue eyes sifting the night for the dark smudge that would be the Glory's dam-line. They missed contact by the width of a hand, and Carr said, unmoved:

"Ten fut o' water the Glory has behind them sand-bags, now. Good fur us Lou picked 'em up."

Tussock made evil foot-hold again; then a nigger-head swamp, sharp with ice, and foul with water that splashed to the eye-brows. All around rose black swan, wide-winged and crying to the night like spirits turned back from the world beyond. The horses took their own way, headlong; and with loose rein, Tod was crossing himself. For ghost-lights played

games in the water that was too sinfully black to reflect God's own light.

On the hill-top they rose the Lion lamps, and caught the air from mountains that the breath of no living thing warmed. Lou came of the breed that loves the asphalt-track on the edge of the great world's grass-plot, and he handled his men with cunning and delight. Round the curved knolls over the Lion where the nozzle-flash climbed to the stars; slow-foot through the running shingle beyond, and into the place where the silence of all the world lived. Here he turned in the saddle.

"You said Ormond saw him on the track?"

"Yes," said Murray; "he was going——"

The boys' deep-chested growl drowned the words. The old crumbling track, beaten out a lifetime ago by the feet of men seeking gold, held the sky-line ten miles off as the bullet flies, and well Scannell's men knew the land in between. For they drew cattle from it in the season, and horses; taking the underway carefully, with daylight to guide.

"Then we'll make a bee-line," said Lou. "It's going to be rough."

Lou lied when it so pleased him, but he spoke less than the truth this night. With hands low and light on the rein, they charged down the slope that was made of frozen creeklets and stones, and rounded off by a brawling little stream with soft bottom. Each man's breath

made a winding-sheet round him, and the sting of frost was live in the air. The track rose by twists and grades, with a great purple sky widening as the earth dropped away. Flax-leaves slashed their faces, blinding the paths that the horses took with strong shoulder-heaves and chest-breathing. The flung-out breast of a hill above jagged the star-clusters. They swung round the curve of it where late snow lay yet in the hollows, and took clear country again, with sparse tussock and slag. A wire fence, like a dewed spider-web, cut the black scarp beyond, and Murray cheered as a schoolboy when it sung behind to the touch of one hoof only.

Hands were numb on the rein; the breath of the eternal snows was too near and too pure; the iron chill of the stirrup made the feet tingle and throb. The smell of bush blew across them; caught and ripped them with a thousand damp hands. It was blind and savage, and sensuous with its rich heavy odours; and the ferny rottenness was dank under-foot.

“How much more o’ this is there?” growled Carr, when the way tilted up a bare hill with a sprinkling of snow on the flint. And Tod answered:

“Divil knows—an’ Lou, if they’re two. But, be all things, I misdoubt it this night.”

Talk dulled in the men; but the horses had the great glad hearts that tire not, and Lou’s

colt strained the rein still. Then, as buckets climb the dredge-ladder, they came one by one to the broken hill-track and paused. Randal dropped from the saddle, and slacked the mare's girths. Murray's face was alight as he followed.

"By Jingo, Lou," he cried, "you've given me something to remember. And I've got my own horse! How the devil do you fellows do it!"

But Lou did not hear. He was watching Randal, and his eyes were shining. Randal's neck was bloody where branches had torn it, and there was mud on his collar. His long hands fumbled stiffly with the buckles, and his pipe was dead between his teeth. But in the clear starlight his lean body moved untired, and his strong face showed hard and more resolute.

"You're a man," said Lou, underbreath. "But if it's you and I for him, Randal, I'll make you sit up."

The men talked amid the clink of harness, and Moody swore as he tried to strike a match. But Murray stood aside with every nerve tingling, and a sudden marvelling at these sons of the hills who knew not exhaustion nor fear.

All God's world is wise and terrible by night. But the hills, that through the centuries bare their breasts to the secrets that the stars tell them, receive an awful majesty which the

plains and the downs never know. For neither beast nor bird break the eternal stillness, nor mark the eternal snow. Flint and red granite, the little grey cotton-plant and the swaying snow-grass held the wastes for their own, and at Murray's elbow one long-dead black pine creaked in the frost-grip. The white spurs were naked in the moonlight; but the gullies were dark as waiting graves. Danny chuckled as he climbed to the saddle again.

"The squad will now perceed ter investigatin' on its own bloomin' 'ook," he said. "I hope it ain't me ter find him, that's all. Young Art's apt ter be lively."

Lou dropped away on Randal's quarter. For him it was to stalk the stalker; and for two fierce hours he played a waiting game, by gully-top and shingle-slope and green spring-heads that the frost had made into skating-rinks. And ever, through the stern white silences, he kept touch of the black shadow that sought and called and sought for hoof-prints again on the frozen snow. By a warm spring in the toi-toi Randal found the hoof-prints. They headed straight for the Big Bush beyond. His teeth shut with a snap, and the mare sprang as the heels slapped her sides. Rotten slag slid away from the hoof; crisp tussock and crackling white spray. The mare's feet made fierce red writing on the flint, and the underway was suddenly slippery with the

little round leaves of loose birch-bush. Great boles and tree-tops closed the earth into shadows, and a sound woke that sent the blood to Randal's throat. For it was the snickering gasp of a winded horse, and a laugh that might be a child's.

Randal sat down to ride; with cunning that swung him unhurt between the trees and the snatching vines; with speed because ahead the bush was cleft by a gully that would audit Art Scannell's accounts for Eternity; and with a brain that said:

"You brute! Oh, you brute! Why don't you let him *go!* You've no right to hold her by that or by anything else."

Scrub crashed at his shoulder, and Lou's light figure rode as his shadow beside him. Randal was blind for an instant. Then he said:

"I want him—myself."

"Of course," said Lou, gaily; "so do I."

Then the laugh ahead filled the night, and words broke before it.

Tripping scrub and vines barred the way; lawyer ripped flesh from faces and necks; creeping lichens were moist on the branches that hit them, and the thick wild smell of bush clogged their breathing. The lust of capture was heavy on horses and men, and Randal's sweating hands slipped on the reins as he lifted his mare forward by the spurs. The bush

thinned, showing the thing that they sought; and beyond lay the gully. Randal caught the frozen flash of a waterfall across it as Lou said:

“Leave him. That will settle all things for ever.”

Three paces, and the black mare slung round to the grip on her bit. Art Scannell’s laugh shut off with a shriek.

“Randal!” he cried, and his whip cut across the face opposite.

Randal jerked the silver-set thing down to the creek far below.

“You’ll follow if you play up with me, Art,” he said.

Lou laughed.

“Go it, Art,” he cried, and slapped the boy’s knee.

Art stooped with a snarl, meeting his teeth in the thick of the hand; and Lou came out of the saddle with the brute that lives in every man quick on his face.

“Lou—don’t——” The girlish treble voice was over-dear to Randal. He made peace by such wit as he had, and Lou looked at him, grinning.

“I think you’ve done more harm than you know, to-night, Randal,” he said. “Take the young beggar where you like. I don’t want to be bothered with him.”

No mood held Lou for long, and he was

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whistling cheerily when the keas on Lonely Hill heard Art Scannell crying down the ways, and answered with a long glad challenge. Lou looked through the gloom at the red of Randal's pipe.

"Taking him down to the hut, then?" he said.

"Yes."

"Murray will come after him."

"Let him!"

"And the boys will say——"

"What?"

The word hit like a bullet, and Lou laughed, low and soft.

"More than Art Scannell's sister would like to hear," he muttered.

A musterer's hut squatted at foot of a siding. Randal led the horses down, hooked the reins to a ring, and said sharply:

"Come off there, Art."

The boy's hands were helpless with cold, and his tears were ice on the mane. But Lou lent his lithe strength to Randal's before the door shut on the three and Randal struck a match to the slush-lamp. Then Art fell on the bunk exhausted; and Lou grinned, dabbing a cut on his lip.

"What are you going to do with him?" he asked.

"Keep him here till he's through with it. You can go down and tell Murray to-morrow. And



tell him he needn't come up. He won't get Art."

Randal kicked some sticks together in the open chimney, and set them ablaze. Then he sat on the chopping-block, his chin in the heel of his hands, and his strong muscles loosed. He had given months of loneliness to this hut in the last sheep-season, and his cast blankets were in the bunk yet. Lou asked no questions. It was not needful. He yawned. Then he grinned again.

"Oh, you fool," he said softly, and glanced at the bunk.

Art Scannell lay across the grey blankets with his smooth pretty face thrown back. The small black head and short upper lip were too like a girl's—too like the girl for whom Randal would have paid away his soul, and who was far above his reach, as men count things in this world. The flames bobbed and fluttered in the chimney; outside the horses dozed under warmth of the bag-covers, and a mopoke called, once and again.

Art Scannell shot up in his bunk, and his eyes were suddenly awful.

"Hear that chap crying," he said. "See him? There . . . through the hole in the thatch!"

Lou leapt for him with his eternal light laugh.

"Now we're in for it, Randal," he said, and brought the boy down by the leg.

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When a man treads a track of his own free-will he has no pity for those bruising their feet alongside. Too many times had Lou been down the path Art led them to find shame therein. But, because of a girl, the boy's feet trod through Randal's heart.

A scarlet morning was on the hill-tops, and the dark of the gullies gave before it when Randal cast wide the door, clearing his half-blinded eyes with his shirt-sleeve. Behind him Lou, unbroken still, sang in his careless tenor:

“Beloved! It is morn.

A redder berry on the thorn, a brighter yellow on the  
corn,

For this good day, new-born . . .”

“Don't,” said Randal with his heart in his throat, and both men looked to the bunk where Art Scannell lay bound with three towels and a belt.

Lou lifted his eyebrows. Then he said lightly:

“It's a noble thing to save a man's life, isn't it, Randal?”

## CHAPTER II

THE long wooden eating-whare smelt of onions and meat, and rang with the talk of Scannell's men at breakfast. Red, frosty sunlight struck the clattering tinware to mix there with the red of the fire; and the slow peace of Sunday lay over the men. Lou blocked the door for an instant, causing Beckett and Scott to shout wrath from their card-game among the dirty plates. Then he swung his legs over a form, and pushed out a place between Mogger and Buck.

"Send along the tea-pot," he said; "and that pannikin. Where's the milk?"

Beyond Steve, Danny's freckled face bobbed out of line.

"Mornin'," he said politely. "Ter-morrer mornin'. Did yer know it? We put in a detail of a day's work while yer was etherealisin' up in the hills."

"Never gettin' yer Sat'day night's spring-cleanin', neither," shouted Beckett, whilst Scott promptly revoked.

Tod spread himself on the battle of dispute delightedly, and Buck said:

"Slep' in yer boots, Lou, didn't yer?"

The last forty hours had been sufficiently heavy to break another man. But Lou grinned, dredging brown sugar into his pannikin.

"Who roped in Art Scannell?" he said.

"Give us another. The boss said you did it. We runned till we was sick of it. Then we comed back—down the old track."

"That's a lie," said Danny, cheerfully. "We was sick of it 'fore we started. Who was the idjit as found him? You or Randal?"

"It was a close thing. But Randal claimed the stakes—which were Art."

"He'd sooner be claimin' the Miss-takes," giggled the cook, tossing tin plates into the sink, and Tod returned, wild-haired, to the table.

"Well, now, but that's a pity," he said. "I'd putt by two masses for the dirty sowl of him, which I was takin' the money down to Father Denis to-day."

"Hand it in fur Jimmie's soul," suggested Danny. "He cud do wi' suthin' ter kip it from drippin' out o' his boot-heels every time he runs away."

Jimmie's life at Mains was a day old. But half the boys on the station had made his nose bleed at the district school in years past—unless Ted Douglas were by. Now Douglas put a leg over the narrow table, and followed it.

"Are you goin' to take that back?" he asked. Danny's freckled nose reefered in a grin.

"Deciduously, yer great lumberin' hipperotermus. Let it go fur Jimmie's boots, then. Double 'eels, fur perfrontin' a leak."

Jimmie flung a scone to secure attention, and his boy-face was unflushed.

"Don't spile him to-day, Ted," he said. "He's goin' down ter see his girl, an' it tuk him a half-hour oilin' his bang. Jes' take him ter pieces pretty, an' put him tergether agin wi' that face o' his turned inside ef yer can manage it."

Lou blinked through the haze of breath and steam.

"Mains has got a nut in you, Jimmie whoever-you-are," he murmured.

Then he went across the yard to his bunk and slept until the noise of a boxing-skirmish, conducted under strictly scientific rules, drew him out to the gay sunshine of the sloping paddock that ended in a rush-bound creek.

Danny was referee and umpire and general promoter, and half the township were there by special invitation. Scannell of Mains allowed all things—in reason; and once, when the vicar objected, he said:

"What would you have the men do? Ride through to the next township and demand drinks as travellers? Too many do that sort of thing already."

## 26 THE TRACKS WE TREAD

Scott sifted through the mob, laying bets. It is quite certain that he would have done the same in church, had the vicar ever haled him there. Lou stopped him.

"Who's that girly-looking kid clapping Gordon?" he asked.

"One of Gordon's shift on the Lion Hydraulic—Roddy Duncan. He's a chum of Art Scannell's."

"Art Scannell!" breathed Lou. Then he broke Roddy's treble laugh with a question. You know Mr. Art Scannell, eh?"

"He's a pal of mine," said the boy, turning in a pride that he could not make careless.

"I congratulate you. Does he ever speak to you of his sister?"

"Miss Effie? Often. An' I see her myself. She comes up to the claim——"

"Do you know anything of Randal?"

"I seen him a few times at Phelan's," said Roddy.

"Ah! with Art Scannell, of course." Phelan's was the lowest hotel in the township. "Well, I hope you'll drop into Blake's some evenings—when Art doesn't want you. I'll be very glad to see you, you know."

Lou strolled off from Roddy's flushed thanks. The dead-level of indifference had no favour for him, and Randal would make a good enemy. Mogger asked what he was grin-

ning for, and Lou answered, jerking his head toward the distant black spur:

"Ted Douglas has just taken Jimmie up there—to vow to love, cherish and protect him, I suppose. It's a great thing to have a mate—for the mate."

Here Lou spoke raw truth. Because seven kinds of love out of eight are one-sided, and the world knows that the eighth is the same.

Beyond the black spur Douglas lay on the dead bracken, and smoked in a silence that hurt him. Jimmie drew his thin little knees under the clasp of his hands, and stared down the tussock gully where sheep fed on the snow-loosened slopes. Presently he said:

"Don't see as it's a thing to get in a sweat about, anyways."

"Don't you?" Ted Douglas sat up, and his strong unlined face was tender. "Ah, but you knows that you does! You can't come that over me, Jimmie. I'm 'feared this is too tough a place for you, lad. Cattle-work puts grit into a man; but it puts the devil into him too. Our chaps have got it proper. They won't stand any sort o' funk'in', an' you——"

"I got a tongue ter skin 'em with. That's more'n you hev."

Douglas felt his great muscles where the sleeves fell away from the forearm.

"I wonder what it feels like to feel afraid," he said slowly.

## 28 THE TRACKS WE TREAD

"Hell," said Jimmie, laconically.

Douglas punched holes in the turf, and his lips tightened. He said:

"I tolt you not to come to Mains. We got to go back after cattle next week. I was up with the boss this mornin'. He guv me the names."

"An——?"

"An' you're one to go, Jimmie."

Then Jimmie pivotted swiftly, speaking words that Ted Douglas would never have forgiven in another man. But he loved Jimmie.

"I couldn't stop it," he said, gravely. "If you're scared, you must hook it. You'll have to do your whack of graft here, Jimmie."

"I don't mind the ridin'. But if the brutes come chargin'—Ted—oh, Ted——"

Douglas put his arm round the thin shoulders, and his grave young eyes were dark with pity.

"There's a bit o' a mutton-bird's egg as won't harden though you boil 'em for a year," he said. "You've had some firin'—is there nothin' won't bile the funk out of you, Jimmie?"

But Jimmie looked across the low hills to the smoke-wreaths of the unseen township, and he gave no answer.

The township ran two cemeteries; but the one on the manuka-hill overlooking the river



knew best who "kept company" and who were only "walking out" in Argyle. For the young have no fear in making love among the dead. And these had been dead so very long that the ever-lasting pea and the clematis and the fox-glove had taken railings and headstones for their own, and wedded with the gorse and briar to give birth to new life.

"But that makes no odds," said Steve. "Bein' miners, it's ten ter one these ain't their right names at all. There was lots ran under false colours in the early days—an' some do it now."

He knelt on a wooden slab, scratching the green moss from it with his finger-nail, and his Sunday coat was tight on his shoulders. The girl who had ordered this spoke with a catch in her throat:

"Don't! Oh, don't say that! Poor things! Here's 'Of your mercy pray for the soul'—suppose it was the wrong soul, after all?"

Steve sat back on his heels, and looked up. No other man on Mains had his reach of arm or his power in a fight. But his heart was as big as his body, and as tender as that was tough.

"There ain't any souls as 'ud be the worse for a prayer from you, Maiden," he said.

Maiden was slim and sweet and supple as a manuka-slip. Her hat was pushed back to a

halo on the fine soft hair, and the half-smile on her mouth was wistful.

"If yer was thinkin' o' my soul, Maiden——" ventured Steve.

"I wasn't. I was thinkin' of Lou Birot's."

"Lou Birot!" Steve came to his feet, and his voice grated. "Lou! Why?"

"Why not?" said Maiden.

"I won't deny as he'd be the better for some prayin' over," said Steve, dryly. "But I'd ruther 'tweren't you did it."

"I don't know as I asked you what you'd rather," said Maiden, with dignity. "Lou wanted me to go walkin' with him to-day; but I'd promised you. I mean to go with him next——"

"Yer won't," said Steve, in sudden fierceness. "Not with Lou—ever. Maiden, yer don't know him. He's a bad lot. A rotten bad——"

"He's got prettier ways'n you have——"

"Yes," said Steve with a grin. "The boys'll tell yer that. Sweet pretty ways he's got. But they're not ways fur a gel like you, Maiden."

"You're cowards, the lot of you," cried Maiden, gripping a half-fallen grave-stone in both little hands. "You're allers passing back-talk about Lou. You're all jealous of him 'cause he's good-lookin' an' clever—what's he done, then, that you're so much better than he is?"

No man could cow Steve. But he stammered before the child-eyed thing in the print frock.

"I—I couldn't tell it yer, my girlie. There's lots o' ways a chap has. . . . Looky here, Maiden: if yer'll lump him inter yer prayers wi' Art Scannell an' Jimmie Blaine, I don't mind."

"And with you?"

Steve looked over the peaceful graves to the flood of sunlight down the peaceful gully, and the half-crescent of the township at end of it.

"If yer like—so long as you remembers me anyways, my girlie," he said.

Fifteen miles off Randal was not exactly praying over Art Scannell. He stood in the hut door-way with Murray, and Murray frowned with bitten lips.

"He's weak as a baby," said Randal. "He needs home and bed, and feeding up. What are you going to do about it? Well?"

"Bring up a trap from the township and drive him home, I suppose. You can ride that black devil of his. But if ever I wanted to put the handcuffs on a man—and he'll do more harm yet. It shakes a fellow's belief—look out. He's waking."

But it was two days before Murray brought Art Scannell home. Randal rode in at the

sunset; rubbed down the mare, fed her, and walked up the track to the house. Tod was sluicing his head in a bucket; but he brought it out with a chuckle as Randal passed by the whare.

"Bedad, thin, me foine boyo," he murmured, "there's apt to be the big throuble for ye directly."

"Where?" demanded Moody, opening an eye. He was lying on his stomach, waiting for the tea-bell.

"Och; it's jist hersilf comin' wid wan Randal wud sooner be afther meeting wid a chopper than wid her, if Scott shpoke the truth."

"Scott can't speak truth," said Moody, blinking up the track. "Miss Effie and Kiliat! That skunk's allers here."

"Ye've said it. And Randal is apt to know of it, too."

The path was narrow, with wet grass on each side. Randal made way, touching his cap. And the girl nodded carelessly, listening to Kiliat. Randal tramped on up the track, and Moody turned with a grunt.

"Told yer Scott lied. They never put eyes on each other."

"Ye're the wise man, entoirely," said Tod, and his voice nettled Moody.

"More'n you are then! Go and drip on somebody else fur a spell, can't ye? Here's

Cookie. He ain't had a wash this week. Or Kiliat cud do wi' some drownin'."

Kiliat was manager of the Lion Hydraulic Sluicing Company, with Ormond to do the work. He was known through the land as a fool, and the Packer, who owned his own private one-horse claim next door, wept when he told of Ormond's patient mending of pipes and patching up of trestles.

"That Comp'ny's suckin' the Lion dry," he said. "With Kiliat to show 'em the way. An' cuttin' down wages too, ain't they, Gordon?"

"You mind yer bloomin' business," said Gordon, suddenly hostile.

The Packer scratched his throat with a dirty finger-nail.

"Never 'ave I called a man my master," he said, in the pride of the free.

Randal crossed the flagged verandah, and knocked on the door of the man he called master.

"Jack told me at the stable that you wanted to see me," he said.

Scannell pushed his chair back from the desk, and looked at Randal straightly. Few could tell when the knife was in his flesh, for he did not flinch from it.

"They tell me you have saved my son's life. I—thank you, Randal."

Randal was yet gentleman enough to flush

under the true eyes. Scannell of Mains had small reason to give thanks there.

"You needn't. Murray did as much. What? Yes, sir. Very well."

The bellow of the tea-bell caught him at the little gate, and he stopped in a sudden sickness. For it was all the strait years of work-life that called from the whare. Then his eyes changed; he laid his hand on the side-rail, leapt it, and ran with long strides to the stables. For Kiliat rode up the pine avenue, and above the fences a little dark head showed alone. She sprang at his tread; her hands out; her face glowing.

"Oh, I'm glad—glad. I wanted to tell you——"

"Effie—dearest—I'm too dirty——"

But the earth gave three clipped moments of Heaven. Then Randal stood back.

"You'd no right to let me touch you," he said. "Out here! And in daylight! You make me a brute to you, Effie. I must go——"

"Wait! Ah! it shouldn't be me to say that! Are you so hungry, then?"

"Yes," said Randal; and his eyes brought the colour swiftly.

"I—I never meant—I want to thank you for Art——"

"Please don't," said Randal dryly. "Your father has done that."

"Oh! And my thanks don't count? No—

you said I wasn't to let you touch me. Well, but you deserve punishing——”

“Let me earn my forgiveness then, dear.”

The mischief left her face.

“There is something I wanted—you know Roddy Duncan from the Lion? He's such a nice little boy, and I've often seen him up there. But—but—he is always with Art; and dear old Art, he—I can't speak to Mr. Ormond myself—but—you know——”

They were the same fine-cut features and long-lashed eyes that Randal had followed into deeps that shook his soul at the remembering.

“I know, dear. I'll go down and see Ormond to-night. He can put a check-strap on Roddy, if you wish it. I'll do what I can to-night. We go out to camp at day-break, you see.”

He had a twenty-mile ride behind him, and four nights that he did not speak of behind that. But he took saddle again that evening under a wet sky, with Danny's blessing chasing him out.

“We're evolutin' teetotalers up at the camp, you'll remember; an' you're not ter bring back more'n a bottle o' lavender water fur Ike——”

Randal ducked from Ike's quick-flung pannikin, and went out on a crest of laughter. It was Danny who last week had discovered Ike behind the brick oven, blue in the face, and spitting “Jockey Club” emphatically.

“Wot's the little game?” demanded Danny.

Ike rubbed himself, and leaned on the wall. "Nellie up at the 'ouse told me I'd fair come over any gal if I scented meself. But I'm blamed ef I'll drink all that bottle fur any gal livin'. She'll hev to take me smellin', or leave me."

Danny carried the bottle back to the whare, and told things. And Ike had taken little joy in life since. For the Mains boys knew what to do with a joke when they saw one.

The night was cold with grey blankets over the hills, and a soft mist rolling along the river. By the blaze of Phelan's one door-lamp Randal caught sight of Art's back in the bar, with Roddy Duncan's bright face beside it.

He slung through the township full-speed, took the track past the Creek to the Lion, and learnt from Fysh that Ormond was three miles off with Father Denis. He turned then, with wrath on his mouth; rode back, and flushed Ormond in the smoke of the priest's little room.

"That young box-man of yours is with Art Scannell in Phelan's bar," he said. "I've learnt something of Art this last week, and I know he'll mess Roddy up pretty quick. Better put a spoke in his wheel, hadn't you?"

Ormond knew Randal as a gentleman may know a station-hand. He put down his pipe.

"Who sent you down to tell me that?" he demanded.



"That's my business. Your business is to look after your men—that is, if you consider your responsibilities at all."

"Please don't apologise for teaching me my responsibilities," said Ormond.

"Don't mean to. Are you going to rope in Roddy, or are you not?"

Ormond blinked across at the other as he stood, straight and lean, in the door, with the rain on his yellow oil-skins, and his hard face grey with cold. Then he got up and spoke as no man of Randal's birth had spoken to him these fifteen years. Father Denis clapped his fat hands on his knees.

"An' ye're all right, then, the pair ov ye. Thrust ye tu know a man when ye sees him, Ormond. Bring him along tu the fire; an' shut the dure, for it's cowl'd enough to freeze tin regimints on us. There's a chair goin' beggin'—ye'll have whisky, Mr. Randal?"

Randal's nerve forsook him. In the colonies no work is derogatory to a man unless he makes it so. He may clean pig-sties, and the friends of his college days will not forsake him; but to take the first step down the ladder which few climb again, must and does lose him touch with his class. This is the inexorable law. Randal was half-way down that ladder long since, and the fierce passion which swept Effie Scannell on its tide might never bear him up-

ward in this world. But the taste of the old years dried his mouth and blinded his eyes as Ormond brought Navy-cut, and decanters that sparkled, and pushed a cushioned chair where the firelight shone. He sloughed his pride with his oil-skins, and sat down. But his tongue was dumb, and Ormond guessed why, with a sudden pity and shame. Father Denis sailed down-wind breezily.

"Bedad; ye're jist the man I'm wantin' the handlin' ov this long while," he said.

"How so?" Randal's voice showed suspicion on the undertow.

"Ye're strong. That boy there's another." He jerked a fat thumb at Ormond. "Ye're both good men in yer hand——"

"You mistake," said Randal, sharply. "I'm a hand myself."

"Blathers! A strong man houlds men all over the worrld an' back agin. An' ye can git where I can't git, Randal. Intu Blake's bar-parlour——"

"You'd not find much you cared for there."

"I'd find men." He blew smoke from his nostrils, and his big heart shone in his eyes. "I'm wantin' men," he said.

Ormond's grin showed the white teeth gripped on the pipe-stem.

"Men like Lou Birot—and Jimmie Blaine—and Rogers?" he suggested.

"I'm wid ye, entoirely. Them most ov all.

Ye'll not heal a wound wid the splinter stayin' in it."

"The wound has bred the splinter."

The priest looked at Randal quickly.

"Begorra; that's the ould riddle ov the hin an' the egg. We'll not ask which came fust, then. Bhut we'll thry tu get the splinter out."

"You never will," said Randal, as one who knew.

"Import a few more chuckers-out made on Murray's last," murmured Ormond.

This pricked Randal's flesh, and roused him.

"You can trust most communities to sift the sound from the rotten. We require a man to ride straight, and to hit straight, and to live straight——"

"Ye measure the last distance wid a mighty crooked shtick, then," said Father Denis, dryly.

Randal reddened.

"We don't ask religion—or sobriety—or the outward graces of speech. But a man who rides and hits out straight can't live very crooked."

"By Jove," cried Ormond, "you've nailed him there! Didn't I tell you, Father? When we see a man's hand shake on the rifle-stock or the rein we mark him down at once. For we knew him in his youth. But the tourists who belt through New Zealand, giving tongue, and picking up stuff as they run—they go back and

use this man for a text, not knowing that he is outside the pale already."

"An' which ov us have the right tu put up the pale?" said the priest, gravely.

"The men do it. The rotters and the others—the chaps who are going to help cook the world's pie in the future. But the tourist doesn't know anything about them."

"It's a hot fire many ov thim will use for the bakin'," said Father Denis, his eyes on Randal's shut hand and mouth.

"I believe you. They will be the men who have learnt first-hand. And you can't learn anything without sweating some of the greenness out of you first. The men who learn first-hand aren't generally sappy."

"If that pie has no taste ov burrn tu it, 'twill be because ye're dead fust, Ormond. Crow away on yer dung hill, me young cock. It is not the worrld will be throubled by ye."

Ormond stood up, straddling before the fire. His shadow fell across the room to a girl's face on the wall. That face was Father Denis' story. It had taught him all he knew.

"This is a populous farmyard, and it's going to be noisier than you think. In this way. It is the People who make the Colonies. It is the Aristocracy who make the Old World—and the Laws. Well, the People stand flat-foot upon the earth, and you can't upset them, be-

cause they've nothing to fall off. Can't you see the pull it gives them?"

Randal glanced up at the virile face and the square set of the shoulders.

"What the devil does it matter, anyway?" he said. "They upset themselves—into their six feet of soil—at the end. Then the Aristocracy have the pull—with a well-dried family vault."

"We do something toward making a New World first, though. The kind of world that doesn't think so much of three languages and blue blood as it does of muscle and endurance and the old, old dogma that a man works for himself and a woman—one woman."

"It will be a stupider world," said Randal, frankly.

"It will be cleaner——"

Father Denis exploded, flinging back his head in a great gust of laughter.

"Ah, git away wid ye an' yer politics, Ormond. Ye'd talk the head off the Lion's lift-poise. Faith, ye've got in wan from the shoulder that toime, Randal, for all ye've bin sook-in' silence so long."

It was sight of Ormond leaning against the mantel-shelf with its old china and heavy bronze candle-sticks that suddenly flicked Randal back into realisation. Far away—in town—Ormond was yet free of the clubs and of ladies' drawing-rooms. His own feet were on

the track up which there is no returning. And only the man who has been there knows what it means to see his equal above him.

He stood up stiff with the hardness back on his face. He called Ormond "Sir" in a sudden defiance, and went out to the night with his shoulders bowed under the old weight. Father Denis drew at his pipe in a long silence. Ormond said blankly:

"What scared him?"

"Himsilf—an' you." The priest's eyes fell on the length and breadth of the other man. "He'll hate ye wan ov these days—or love ye. Bhut I'll never git hould of him. A man who has fed wid the beasts ov the shtable will not come back tu the banquetin'-hall. For why? Because it wud be tu 'come back.'"

### CHAPTER III

“RAININ’. B’Gosh! Rainin’ barrers an’ pitchforks.”

Tod pulled the blankets over his head with a sleepy mutter, and another blue roll three men off said something vivid and very distinct. Buck sprang upright, his goggle eyes staring.

“Rainin’. Who said rainin’?” He stuck a leg under the tent-flap and drew it back with a yell. “My daisy; it’s torrantin’! And them hosses in the yard. We can’t leave them hosses in the yard.”

Buck loved horses better than himself or any other man. According to popular superstition he had been one at the beginning of things. There are certain men whom the animals take into fellowship; and these are the only men who do not attempt to explain why.

“Shut yer head,” growled Scott, reaching a boot, and loosing it with insufficient aim. “Jes’ yer lie down an’ see ef we can’t leave ’em.”

It was Moody who caught the boot, and returned it emphatically; but Buck’s speech overrode all complaint.

"I ain't goin' to hev my hoss harrerred. I'll take him up ter the bush——"

"By the Lord Harry—here—scrag him, somebody——"

Came a quick rustle among the blankets and chopped tussock, and a spurt of rain across Danny's face where he lay by the flap. Then the unbelieving silence of the men. Lou broke it. He leapt for the opening.

"Come on, you fools. He'll do it, sure as——"

Steve was shouting for his boots, and five pairs of feet battered Danny as they passed him. He grabbed the last ankle, and came out with it, sending a wild shout before him into the night. In the eight-by-twelve whare that made breakwind for the tent slept Ted Douglas, with Randal and Mogger. Douglas had the special comprehensive understanding of the ruler, and the bunk next the door as well. He cast on coat and boots with his senses half-waked, passed Conlon at the first creek, and learned essentials by one curt sentence flung piece-meal.

A wild half-lit sky was over the hills, with straight slivers of rain pelting through it, and a giddy dance of storm-clouds red above the bush. With the shout of the wind came the grunt of flying Paradise duck and the peculiar *whish* of blown birch-leaves. A tossing cabbage-tree marked out the yard-gate; and, head



down, the boys swung for it, unspeaking as a pack of hounds in sight of the kill. Sleet mixed with the sleep in their eyes, and Danny lost both boots in the moss of a spring-head. They were stiff, each and each, with the saddle and with bruises; for in rough country a stockman takes falls in the work of most days; and well they know that not one man, though that man should be Buck, would hold thirteen horses when Nature was angry.

Down the acre-wide yard swept the horses, like ghosts without sound or shape. Behind, Buck was mad as the grey mare he straddled. The swing of her body and the smell of wet hair made him drunk with the joy of it, and he brought his mob to the gate with the longing for freedom clutching him too.

The gate swung in the wind, and Lou caught it as Ike's cob struck it full with his chest. The rebound cast Lou three yards down the track where the pack-horse pinched his arm with a hind-shoe as it jumped him. Lou twisted; snatched at a mane that blew in his face, gripped the nostril; the mane; forced the bridle he carried between the teeth and over the ears, and came up astride, with the check-strap flapping. The men were gasping and giddy as they saw, and Tod spoke for them all when he said:

"Sure the divil is a swate kind frind to Lou.

A or'nary good man wud 'a'got the neck broke off of him."

Lou loosed his belt, and brought it down on the rump. He slung past them as a bullet from the rifle, and headed the rush on the lip of the bush. Then the grey dawn was pin-pricked by shouts and waving arms and the hiss and crackle of whips. The roar and the rain-beat dazed and cowed the mob. The corners were turned in, each on each, and Lou belted the last-comer into the yard with his strap. Then he came over the fence with his voice too soft.

"Where is Buck?" he said.

Danny sniggered, carrying a drowned boot in either hand.

"Where wud he be like ter be but promenadin' inter the bush, an' stayin' there? He's permiskious enough ter see as we ain't pleased wi' him, if he is dotty."

Douglas swept up an armful of dead manuka and led the way to the hut. Here, while the water ran off them, the boys turned about and about before the fire that raged up the tin chimney to the dawn-sky, and Randal extracted a mic-a-mic thorn from Danny's big toe to the tune of a half-hundred cheerful jokes. Lou fed the fire just below the swinging billy, and once he said:

"Buck will go home, I suppose. He knows

we're clearing Black Hill to-day; but he won't come along to the party."

"Yes, he will," said Mogger suddenly. "Buck's all sorts of a fool but a funk. He'll carry his swag in all right—an' what are we goin' ter do ter him?"

Lou sat back on his heels, whistling softly. Ted Douglas turned on him.

"You'll not mess wi' the boy on yer own, Lou," he said.

"You'll mind your own business, perhaps," suggested Lou, sweetly.

"I am. Buck's ter my charge. He's a idjit clean through; but he'll come up ter his whippin' like a good sheep-pup. And it ain't you ter give it——"

"Want to kill him yourself?" asked Lou with a delicate sneer.

"We all wants ter kill him," explained Moody. "And we're all goin' ter. But not the same way as yer'd do it."

"Perhaps not," said Lou, lightly.

Ted Douglas thrust his hands deep in his pockets.

"If you goes hurtin' Buck, I'll sack you," he said slowly.

Lou's lip upturned from his even teeth; but no man saw his eyes. He stooped to the fire again.

"It sounds so well to write a big cheque, doesn't it? But it's better to remember that it

might possibly be dishonoured at headquarters."

"It's you as is more likely ter be dishonoured," said Douglas in sudden wrath.

Lou came to his feet with a face that brought three men between him and the other. Danny laughed, rocking on the bunk.

"Can't yer stand chiackin' yet, Lou? Wi' all the efforts I've taken to substantiate yer in it, too! Ike, put some tea inter that billy, and guv me a drink, for I'm fair climaxed wi myself."

But a half-hour later, when they got to saddle with wet oilskins abroad in the wind, Danny muttered to Mogger:

"Ted'll pay for that. Pay through the nose, he will. Lou is darnation clever."

Mogger glanced at a little cramped figure atop of a big bony roan. He hoped that Lou would hit there when the chance came. For—saving always Ted Douglas—no man on Mains had any love for Jimmie.

When man first put foot on her the Back-Country made some rules and she had kept them. They that serve her shall love her, for she will have no divided tribute. In their strong youth they must take her yoke gladly; nor may they bend under it nor break. And in return she gives them little rest and much danger, and—many times—death. She gives too the power to be steadfast against self—which

is the greatest power of all; and the child-wisdom that finds joy in the Little Things that lie along every track. And that is why the hills-men can play with the rocks and the big bush and the mountain rivers, and then go down and take the townships to pieces in a gaiety of heart which an occasional night in the lock-up does not dim.

A savage day's work rode with the boys over the downs and up cutting by cutting. From the receiving paddocks, two round miles from the hut, the cry of already pent cattle blew down wind, and the throb of impatient hoofs below it was over-like the beat of far-distant surf. On the down-top Ted Douglas slung the chase clear for the snows where they blanketed the gnarled ranges and peaks. Tod and Jimmie swept in the van, flinging coarse jokes which Lou tossed back tipped with venom that no man but Randal had wit to see. And Randal's mind was on sharper things. A man may walk blind where the scent of roses pull his senses, until a chance thorn-prick opens his eyes to the knowledge that he is on forbidden ground. But Randal had broken into the garden wilfully, and well he knew the smart of the thorns among the roses. He lifted his head to the free wind beating down from God's own snows, and the sting of it eased him. For Nature in storm knows how to comfort her son when his soul is in storm also.

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Through manuka-scrub and savage mata-kuri the track lay to Black Hill, where it rose behind the rain; stark with bare rock, and rotten with papa, and slippery with blue tussock that lay flat to the wind. One by one the boys swarmed it, as white ants swarm a wall; riding headlong up the dried water-courses, swinging aside from the sky-flung bluffs, and taking each man his separate beat, with the rain spurting off his oil-skins, and the wet gear harsh in his hands.

Above the cry of startled duck and the occasional anger of a kea, rocketted the stock-whip talk as the lashes licked after the heaving flanks. From the sheltered lea of great bluffs they started the cattle; from age-hollowed limestone caves; from deep guts ripped out by water-spouts and yet pallid with snow in the meadows, and from little gully-bottoms where the drowned scrub baptised them into new pains and sorrows. Scott strained his colt's stifle on a shingle slip where he tried to prevent a stampede, and Mogger put out his elbow when he left the saddle in a blind creek. But he pulled it in again by aid of a stirrup-leather, and collared his bolting mob on the slope below.

Beyond a patch of mic-a-mic Ted Douglas saw a horseman whom he had not sent. He stood in the stirrups with the rain blowing across him.

"Buck," he shouted.

Buck came, his blank face more blank than before.

"I got a cow and a calf over there," he said.

Douglas grinned. No man argued with Buck. As a horsebreaker he was the pride of both Islands. Beyond that he was a child, and all true men gave him gentleness therefor.

"Whale away at 'em then, an' kip clear o' Lou. He'll get his knife into you if he can."

"I jes wanted ter take the hosses out'r the rain," explained Buck, and rode on.

But Lou was looking for stronger meat that day. There was Douglas to pay for words said some hours back. And, by the nature of a man, he cannot forgive evil truth, though the evil of lies may not touch him.

To the heel of the day they worked; soaked and rain-beat; riding each man with his life in the hand that carried his rein, and watching eternally for the spear-glint of horns and the skin-flash through loose bush and crowding manuka.

Near sunset, when the storm gave to a scarlet evening of blown clouds and clucking wind, Lou found his chance and took it. Where a humped spur ran clear into the western sky Jimmie cautiously wheeled his mob, bringing them back, slow-paced. Lou, on the breast of the hill above, looked down to see deep gullies either side the spur and the gleam of rock-

bound water at bottom. The blue glint that all men hated shot into his eyes as he rounded his own haul with haste. They were a mixed haul: two-year-olds, poddies and pikers; a half-dozen moth-eaten mothers, and a scrub bull of ten years which had never been branded. Lou had played with him all down the hill, putting a blind deviltry into him with the lash, and the sweat and foam mixed with the blood on his quarters. Skilfully, and unseen, Lou switched the drive on to Jimmie's spur, and drew in to watch developments. And in all the hush of sky washing round the bare scrubby spur, and the jutting breast of the hill, there was only the dry clack of hoofs, and the great bell-note of the red piker as he shouldered through the young bulls and the cows.

With dust to guard and cover them the frightened mob broke down the tussock for the spur-tip. Above Lou four men came into sight on the hill-top. Lou laughed. The game was not then for him only. A choice lay with Jimmie. Had it been another man there would have been no choice; but Lou, sitting easy in the saddle, knew the fall of the die before it was thrown.

The roar and crackle of broken scrub blew out on the wind. A dead rimu jarred when the crush struck it. The toss of glinting horns and white spume made foam above the billowing backs. Stray cabbage-trees and low



whanae-clumps sifted and parted them; and here the determination of a twelve-foot whip could block and swing a hundred—two hundred—with the coming army to help.

Mogger was roaring from the scarp above. Ike, standing in his stirrups, whistled frantic appeals. Then Ted Douglas pelted past headlong. Lou took some payment at sight of his face.

Nakedly in sight of his fellows, the coward in Jimmie fought with his training. He fell back from his own mob where it stopped, pawing earth uneasily. He pulled the reins this way and the other; beat his mare; wrenched her back. Once he swung out his whip, but it dropped unspeaking.

Lives out-back are run on the army lines, and a man who fears his enemy—be it bucking horse or charging cattle or a plough in stony ground—takes something of the grade of a deserter in battle. Ted Douglas knew it. He had seen men out-casts on the cattle-camp before this day. Jimmie knew it. But his tongue was dried leather in his mouth, and his hands turned clammy on the reins. Down the hog-backed spur he saw Douglas coming, and the chill air bore a shout with a prayer in it. The charging mob crashed into the loafers, bunched and turned them, and the red, roaring thunder swerved away to the right. Along the very lip of the gully Douglas was coming,

his old bay full-extended. His spurs dripped blood, and his bitten lip was blood-spotted. On the brink the red piker pulled up with a jerk and a bellow that broke to a scream as the mob behind swamped him and pitched over with him.

On the hill-side Scott was left in charge of ninety head, whilst six men tore down the spur, slung their reins to the scrub on the rim, and went over to the cold dusk made awful by the rage of mad brutes in the hand of death. For a full hour they strove in the slippery rock-bottoms; giving the keen knife to those beyond help, gentling and beating the rest up to the gathering night on the ranges. Then came the wet saddles again, and the fierce alert ringing and wheeling and flogging that brought all at last to the jaws of the paddocks far down on the flat. Jimmie said once to Douglas:

"I—I couldn't help it." And Douglas made answer:

"You'll have the chanst to say that to-night, I reckon. Git down to your work now."

Scannell's boys knew how to give and how to take. They usually did both crisply; rounding off the episode, and casting it behind them as a thing past. But first was the day's work to hold up to the end; and the boys were saddle-stiff and weary and sweating before the gates swung close and the last weaner cried inside the bars.

Jimmie's punishment had gathered in intensity as the sting of a black icy night folded round, to find each man unresting yet, and empty with hunger. And through the dark and the aching exhaustion more than shame dogged Ted Douglas.

For every head of stock and every inch of brown earth on Mains was dear to him, and this night he doubted for the first time whether or no Jimmie was dearer still.

The boys rode back to camp unspeaking. They fed in silence until Lou gave the lead from where he lay in a bunk, his eyes eager, his long lithe limbs at ease. The sternness of coming judgment was on the other men to make them awkward and dumb, and into the tenseness Lou slid his cool voice.

"Any fellow going to ask Jimmie questions?"

"There's lots of men can't——" began Douglas; but Randal's speech cut the words.

"You're out of this, I think, Douglas. Jimmie has lost Mains twenty head of cattle, and it's he who has to answer for it."

Danny was a Heaven-built peacemaker. He took his teeth from a hunk of bread, saying:

"Leave it till ter-morrer, yer peripatetics, can't yer? We ain't none on us up ter ancient hist'ry ter-night."

Jimmie spoke from the candle-box near the

fire. His unhallowed wit had given him a certain holding among the boys, but they had no ears for it to-night. There was no loop-hole in this disgrace which had come upon Mains, and no flicker of fun on any face beside Lou's. Lou sat up and flung the stone.

"I'll lend my blanket for thirty pitches," he said.

Ted Douglas gasped where he stood behind Jimmie, his strong bony face white under sweat that had not been wiped away. Buck shivered.

"Thirty'd tear the inside out'r him," he said. "I had it done ter me wonst up North—an' that was on'y twenty. But I didn't hev no stum-mick fur a week."

Jimmie was using talk that brought all the men to their feet. Lou sprang up.

"That's enough," he said. "Bring him outside. It's starlight."

"Ted—Ted—stop them——"

Steve gathered Jimmie in his great arms.

"He can't answer fur yer no more, Jimmie," he said. "Yer playin' off yer own bat ter-night."

Ted Douglas ruled his life by the ethics of fairplay. But it was needful for Randal to block him at this moment.

"You can't stop it, Douglas," he said. "Stay in here, if you like; but they're going to take it out of Jimmie to-night. If Lou had

brought along his whip they'd have used it."

Then he went out and shut the door.

Randal had neither hate nor pity for his kind. He saw the justice in this, and stood by in the cold bright-starred night; but he gave no help, nor yet any hindrance. Sheer behind the whare the bush rose up to the sky. The babble of a creek two yards off mixed with the distant roar of the shingle river and the low brush of horses cropping long grass. The little sod whare was sallow in the faint light. Each step and word rang in the frosty air. But there was no mercy for Jimmie in the night, nor in the faces and the quick hands about him.

Within, Ted Douglas stood against the narrow chimney-shelf, his head down on his arms. Originally, blanket-tossing is a school-boy trick; but the fun goes out of it very swiftly when a man is delivered to the punishment. Each soul is made dual that it may understand other souls if it will; and if the man in Ted Douglas stood firm for the honour of Mains, the woman in him shook at foreknowledge of Jimmie's pain. Through the shut door came the shout of the old-time formula. First Scott's voice, loud and clear:

"Who lost twenty head o' cattle fur Scannel?"

Then a full-bodied shout of "Jimmie!" a gasping wait, a thud, and Scott's voice again.

Lou sat on a dead tree, watching the hard faces in the starshine. And, having more than ordinary perceptions, he knew that in the dumbness of the whare someone suffered more than Jimmie. At the second pitch Jimmie was cursing. By the sixteenth sobs and prayers galloped together, and Danny said:

"A lot of sense there is in takin' the use out o' him, isn't there? Give him one more fur luck, yer galapods, an' be done with it."

"Nineteen," said Mogger, and Scott took up the burden again.

It was a scream of agony that brought Douglas out with a face that the boys did not know.

"For God's sake—stop it—stop it! Or chuck me ef you want to kill someone."

Mogger grinned with his hard hands gripped on the blanket.

"He's takin' his gruel alone ter-night, Ted," he said. "There ain't no use in yer comin' along wi' the spoon. We'll give him every bit he kin carry—there's more blankets ef this one don't hold."

All was done with in time, and Jimmie lay on the frosty earth, helplessly sea-sick. Lou chased the pitiful Danny before him to the tent.

“Don’t you fret,” he said. “Jimmie’ll sleep in Ted’s bunk to-night.”

And Jimmie did. But Ted Douglas sat staring at the dead fire-ash until dawn-break, and twice a man roused in the night to hear Lou laughing like a child in his sleep.

## CHAPTER IV

“DAYLIGHT, boys! Day-li-ight——”

“Ut is Moody this toime,” cried Tod, and he waked with a snort. “Will ye be afther givin’ him to me, then, for I’m wantin’ to kill the ould head off him, sure?”

But it was Ted Douglas who roused them out headlong; who chased them with their gear to the yard, and clipped their feeding-time close at each end. At no hour was there give or take in Ted Douglas when work lay to hand. The boys knew and accepted this, and themselves gave tongue with him against a shirker. By this knowledge they read Ted’s curt words when Jimmie hauled his cob through the gate.

“You’re not wantin’ yer hoss this mornin’, Jimmie. Go an’ rake up sticks fur the fires.”

Then he flung himself into the leather, and gave the lead through the long dewy tussock that wiped the dried blood from the spur.

Scott took on six bets before the crowd had homed to the saddles. He believed indubitably that Ted would shield Jimmie this day and the next—and all the other days to come.



"But he'll sweat for it if he do," he said, combing his matted whip-lash through his fingers. "Playin' low-down on Mains, that is."

"An' what fur you?" cried Danny in wrath. "What fur you as is on'y sober when yer's card playin', an' on'y workin' when Ted's got his toe inter the back of yer? You ter talk o' low-down!"

Steve split the waking quarrel with the wedge of body and tongue.

"It's a tough knot fur Ted ter chop through anyways," he said. "He's got ter tell Scannell as Jimmie's a rotter—an' he does love Jimmie as some chaps loves a gel—or he's got ter guv Mains a chanst o' more muckin' when there comes a tight corner again. But Ted'll tell Scannell."

"Bein' Ted I won't say you're wrong," said Conlon. "But it'll cut the heart out of him. And nine men out of ten wouldn't do it."

Conlon had come to this work for sheer love of it, as many another has done and will do. He knew every head of stock was sacred to Ted Douglas, for he too had given all that he had in payment for the serving of it.

"Bedad, ut's ter'ble onplaisant to be the tinth man," remarked Tod, fighting with his young filly as she twisted head-and-tail. "He's apt to have all the sentiments an' set-ups as belong be rights to the others too. An' ut's a quare

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old stomach-ache they do be gettin' in their conscience o' toimes!"

Then his filly took charge and raced with him into the puffs of mist that lay on the heights.

Scannell's receiving paddocks lay over three spurs and a rock-ridge and two gullies. Danny explained this once in the township.

"The arcumtect as was given the job o' makin' Mains had a high 'pinion o' hissself," he said. "An' he was allers tryin' ter git ter the top o' it. That's why there ain't as much flat on Mains as yer cud iron yer tombstone shirt on."

Lossin suggested that the flat had got into the Mains men instead, and Tod, who assisted at the after-result, gave Danny all the praise that was due to science and wind.

Through the dark shadows and the white mist and the shapeless grey clumps of manuka and tutu the cattle heard the sharp-spoken whip-talk, and the crack of branches as the horses crashed through. Uneasy mutters pricked each little group; the bulls stood apart, great heads low, eyes and ears alert, and a swift fore-foot pawing the earth. Then weaner, cow, and scrubber broke all ways, taking shingle slip and riven flint and tussock unerringly, and sending their bellowing fury down the wind to drown the gay mock of the stock-whips.

The white starshine gave to pale amber,

to pink, to the first blue of the sky. On the naked spurs that sprang out from the hill, leading straight down to the branding-yard square, red, white, black dots were cast out, as a child flings beads that roll apart, and together, and mix, and tear ever toward the bottom. Scannell saw them come, with sheen of hides and of horns, and all sounds faint and blended as the changes of the dawn. By the yards Scannell sat his cob stiffly. He had grown grey at this game for the love of it, and the old lust drew him out to each muster with an ache in the arm that would wheel no more scrubbers by the swing of a twelve-foot lash. It was a new generation and new blood; but they played the same old game, and only the man who has trod that track knows the joy of it. He passes; and if the clay under the feet of the next man is knit by blood-cement, none ask questions. For the wind keeps the records, and the sunshine, and the old, old grey bitterns that cry from the flax-swamps.

Down the spurs Scannell saw them coming, and sounds swelled to crackling thunder, and the tossing wild river took shape. Between two unjoined mobs rode Lou; his rein loose as he swung his colt with the knees, and the long lash licking full length right and left, drawing sullen ones in until the parallels met. The boys fed more streams to the main, and

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the whole bulk took the slope together in a grand wild break that stirred Scannell's blood.

By the yards Jimmie's fires burnt blue in the sunlight. The branding-muster was heavy work on Mains, with three sets of irons going at once, and the scrub-land to clean up when all was done. The wings of the yard stretched wide, high, and unbending. Unthinkingly Scannell's fingers closed for a short whip-handle that was not there. Then he pulled his cob back, and the taste of his years was insipid on the tongue, for there was no salt left in them.

The very air sang with life and wide sound, and the smell of new blood, and sweat and cow-breath. Conlon was mad with the delight of it, and Ted Douglas turned reckless Tod from certain death by a well-delivered cut on his mare's quarter. The quickness of eye and limb on a foot-ball field falls before the swift craft of the stockman. Scannell drew in his breath as he saw the boys handle the run, blocking them, ringing them, wheeling them ever nearer and nearer with swaying bodies and lashes that spun dripping red in the light, and cunning horses that raced and swung to the knee-grip.

An angry mother chased Moody thrice round the yards. He brought her back with some sleeve and flesh gone, and rode in the first

flight thereafter with his shirt-tail bound round his forearm.

The leading rush struck the wing, and the jar of posts sent Jimmie's heart to his throat. The boys fastened on the sweating flanks as flies fasten; relentless, unafraid; giving no inch when a piker turned at charge, or a silly weaner dodged between a hack's forelegs. And above the wild talk and the hoof-beats and the snarl of unresting whips, Ted Douglas held sway yet: assigning place by the crook of his arm; hustling, steadying, leading a rush; telling a man off to ring in an outcast, and drawing tighter the unbroken rope that was vivid, alert, eager life. Steve had said once that Ted Douglas was made up of nerves and that each nerve had a separate eye, and Tod answered, smarting under deserved chastisement:

"Bedad; some of thim nerves have quare ould muscles to them, thin."

Scannell saw his head-man's face just once, as the bay mare shot past with Ted stooped over the wither and the threat of his long whip slung out. And it startled him for the pain that under-lay the work-look. Each man who engages to rule over men takes more than their bodies under his power. By the strength of the personality which makes the ruler, his men grow to dress their consciences by him, and their ideals, and many things that go to make up their manhood. Ted Douglas had learned

it all in his youth, and he paid for it this day, full tale. And there lay no side-track for his feet if he would keep Mains' honour unsmirched in the eyes of the boys.

No man on Mains could ride the bay mare save Ted Douglas only. The boys of that day had slung him on her back when she was raw, young and untamed as himself. They had broken each other to cattle-work, and taken their falls together when ways were rough; and not a stockman from Riverton north to the Stour could wheel a breaking piker against the pair.

The echoes were mad among the black spurs and the naked scarps and the long slopes where the toi-toi shook. The mid-day pressed its hot hands down on the yards; and through the dust and the weary crying of weaners, and the bellow and stampede of furious scrubbers, the Mains boys yarded their muster, slacked girths, and squatted straightway on the grass with damper and floods of hot tea. They were sweat-marked and blood-marked, burnt black to the shirt-line, and cheerful as the moko-mokos in the bush-corner by the waterfall. Scannell fed them; and winks flickered the round of rough faces as Ted Douglas talked technicalities with nothing behind.

"Hand over that five bob you owe me," said Scott, suddenly.

Tod knocked aside the stretched hand.

"Well, I niver, an' set you up! Do ye think Ted won't be backin' up to the brandin'-iron wid the divil a—there! Did I not say it?"

Ted Douglas was on his feet before Scannell. He did not see Jimmie's start, and quick-whitened face; nor Lou's steady gaze; nor the pulsing of the pale flames beyond Scannell's head. But he knew all these things, and he toed the mark with his head up.

"We lost twenty beasts on Black Hill yes'-day," he said. "They pitched over inter a creek-bottom. Near all young steers an' calves, they was."

Scannell's face set to a look that his son knew well.

"Any special man's fault?" he demanded.

Scott nudged Ike where they lay arm by arm on their stomachs.

"Doubles er quits?" he muttered.

Ike hit out at him loosely, unlooking. For the whole tide of his half-baked lumpish youth set with reverence and puzzlement toward Douglas.

"They broke out o' hand on the hill," said Ted Douglas, "from Lou's lot; but 'tweren't his fault. I tried to head them, an' I couldn't. An' I was nearer down than Lou."

"Then no man was to blame?" asked Scannell.

Ted answered slowly; and the shake of his voice ran through each man that he governed,

"Yes. There was a chap down on the spur. He orter turned them; but—he funked it."

Lou smiled a very little, blinking round at the tense faces. He recognised the bitter, unbending tenets of duty whereby Ted Douglas scourged himself and his men. Scannell's eyes were not good to see. Always he had ridden in the first flight in the old days.

"And the man who funked was——?"

"Jimmie Blaine," said Ted Douglas, and stood unmoving, his hard hands shot up at his sides, and the whole bright earth smudgy before him.

"Was he out with you this morning?"

"No. I couldn't let him ride for Mains again."

Scannell's keen eyes met Ted's for one instant of understanding.

"You've done more for Mains than that," he said. "That'll do. Jimmie Blaine! Come over here a minute."

Scannell sacked Jimmie in three pointed sentences that sent the boys to the branding with new grit to bite on, and amaze in their souls.

"I believe Ted thinks more o' Mains than he do o' Jimmie," cried Moody, goggle-eyed, and scruffing a kicking calf for the iron. "Thinks more o' Mains than he do o' us! He'd tell on us if he reckoned he orter! Us!"

Lou pressed on the sizzling iron, and the laugh danced up in his eyes.



“Ted’s got Scannell’s ear to the tether’s end now,” he said. “You didn’t happen to remark that Ted Douglas thought more of Mains than he did of himself, did you?”

## CHAPTER V

"It's about time you came down for them," said Murray. "I ran in three of 'em Thursday night, and the whole gang has been playing Old Harry to-day."

Murray had been making particular investigation in the township; but this told no more than Purdey knew already.

"What the merry springtime can you expect?" he said. "They've had a savage seven months of it up in the hills, and they were just sick for the smell of the township again. They'll work up to the knocker once I rope 'em back to camp. But you must give a man one chance in the year to blue his cheque. And if you'll just shut your eyes to a bit of larking——"

"Faith! I've had to shut more than my eyes already, my innocent! They have been painting the town red this week-end, and shouting drinks for every mother's son that can stand up to it. There's a big hairy brute with one ear gone——"

"Pug Chaney? Yes; I don't think he would be quite your style. But he's a first-flight axe-

man, Murray. If you want to make an example of some of 'em leave me him. I can't do without Pug."

Beyond Lonely Hill and beyond North-of-Sunday, Purdey contracted the working of the saw-mill in the Big Bush for Scannell. The strait years through he ruled near a hundred men, all told; and it was only when the frost struck the heavy snow to flint for perhaps a clipped week in the winter, or again when spring floods swamped them out, that Purdey's camp ran wild; taking payment in the township bars for lean labour-filled days, and grinding Murray down to the bed-rock of desperation and profanity.

"For not all Mains and Behar on an election-night—no, nor on a race-night, either—can see the way your men go when they foregather down here, Purdey. Though I will say you make 'em sweat for it once you've got them into the chains."

Purdey grinned slowly. He was young and soft-voiced and quiet. But the wills of eighteen men out of twenty broke before his when they followed him over the severing tide-way of two worlds, and came under the dominion of the bush.

"I take delivery up at camp," he said. "They're to your interest down here—not mine."

A blast of sound rolled down the street,

mixed with the rattle of wheels. A handful of Purdey's men were driving round the fifteen corners of the township with six beaten kerosene-tins and a couple of concertinas.

Murray moved in his chair uneasily, and shook out his pipe.

"I'll have to go out and kick up a shine directly, you know," he said. "Where d'you rake 'em up from, Purdey? They are quite the hardest filings I ever broke a knife over."

Purdey sleeked his little fair moustache with slow fingers.

"A man's not a man without a splash of the brute in him," he said. "They are not pretty; but they're tough. The bush won't have weaklings. I bully-dam them from the jump, and if they play up they know it. But, bless you, if I kick them out they come back the next year with their tails down. It's like to like, and no other job can hold them for long. When the bush calls they've got to answer, if it strips half their life off 'em."

"I know. You see it in every caste. They must run with their own mob; for their earmark is struck, and the brand of the wild is on their shoulders. Now, by all the — there go the Salvation Army lassies. Three of 'em. I made sure they'd have the sense to lie low to-night. Purdey, those pet lambs of yours will be raising Cain directly. Come on."

Murray was in plain clothes; but he carried

a revolver. Tact would be needed this night; with perhaps straight hitting, and the threat of a shot sent wide. The side-street, with its one lamp at the corner, was given over to a cow cropping grass by the foot-path; but the next flickered with lanterns and roared with sound as the two ran into it. The bleared red eye above Phelan's door rocked where someone struck the lamp-edge with a stick, chanting a song that made Murray's ears flame. Purdey's grip held his arm.

"You'll get kiboshed if you jump into that," he said. "They're drunk as lords. Let him sing. There's no one at Phelan's but the old man; and Cox is a pretty muddy puddle if he can harm Phelan. Oh, by Jove! Ring those lassies off——"

The three girls paused on the curb, and lifted a hymn, sweet and clear. By order of the belief which they serve, it is the lassies who pray on the street corners; standing pitiful and unafraid, among the rinsings that wash through all townships, and out again into the unknown. And there is no man so sinful but he will respect the lassies—unless the hand of drink is too heavy on him. From Blake's bar-parlour Randal heard the first notes of the hymn, and the shout of coarse laughter that followed.

"Come on," he said, and no more. But eight men pelted after him over the street.

It was to Tod's eternal sorrow that he was not in Blake's parlour that night. Lou told all in unblemished vividness later, with the Packer to grunt the burden; and the middle piece came once from Steve when his great blundering heart ached for the unburdening.

"I was mad," he said. (This was up a dried water-course under the stars, with no one to hear but Tod.) "I was blind, blazin' mad. What sense had Maiden ter go takin' up wi' the Army, an' ter go singin' in the street? An' she innercent as a little soft-breasted bush-wren, an' them Army lassies hevin' ter wade roun' in all the devil's evil o' the world. It was Randal cut us out a way through the ruck, wi' his head under his arms same as we does in a football rush—near got squished too, he did. I hed holt on her ter carry her out 'fore I knew who it was. There was Pug Chaney wi' his arm roun' her——" Steve looked down at his knuckles. "Tuk near as much skin offen him as offen them," he said.

"I was fancyin' as it was Lou brart her out," said Tod. "It was Lou she was walkin' wid up to the cemet'ry lasht avenin'."

"Was she?" Steve's voice roughened. "I didn't think—but she ain't spoke to me sence last night, an' Lou—he caught her hand when I was lightin' out wi' her, an' he kissed it. 'You're brave, Maiden,' he said, an' was inter the thick of it agin 'fore I could lash him. An'

I—I was blind mad—when I set her down at the corner she was cryin', an' I was sick wi' thinkin' o' what she'd heard. So I messed it up straight. 'Take shame ter yerself,' I said, 'ter go listenin' ter foulness not fit fur men. Git yer home an' ter bed, an' furgit it.' An' she run from me; up an' in at the door, an' I went back——"

"Well then?" asked Tod after a pause.

Steve's fingers gripped the tussock-tufts until the life flew from them in spurted earth.

"I reckon I did some good work fur Murray." Then he sat upright, his voice shaken with passion. "Tod—did you ever want ter kill? Ter git on a man, an' break the back of him, an' ter see him dyin' under yer hands——"

"Bedad, I disremimber if iver I did," said Tod, startled. "Ye're not afther feelin' that away wid me, Steve; are ye now?"

"I would hev killed Lou ef I'd had him under me boots in that mix-up," said Steve slowly. "Maybe I'll kill him yet."

"There's more than wan wud kill Lou with delight," said Tod, ruminating. "What does he bring Roddy Duncan tu Blake's for but to git Randal woid wid his gab of Art Scannell an' Miss Effie? I seen Randal wid murder in the black face of him more than wanst."

"Art and Roddy were in Phelan's wi' the rest," said Steve, coming to his feet clumsily. "I saw Roddy cryin' like the girl-baby he is."

Randal had seen more than that when he burst through the welter of men. In the red of the bar and the lamp Art Scannell stood, capless and coatless, drumming the tambourine snatched from Maiden, and shouting words that brought Randal's clapped hand over his mouth. Art struck him without delay. Then the surge of the struggle swung them apart. The black night rocked with shouts and cursing and ribald laughter. On a wave-crest Steve's face gleamed white, with drops of sweat on the forehead, and Randal heard the crack of his shut fist once and again. Came a flash of Roddy's scared boy-face where great hands forced him down on his knee-bones. Into the tossed wrath and fury, and the stench of spirits and heated men, Murray's voice clanged like struck iron. Purdey was laughing on the outskirts. It was for Murray to handle these men down here. He would wring out his own payment beyond North-of-Sunday.

Somewhere out of the blaring sounds reared Pug Chaney's challenging war-note, and Lou answered with his light glad laugh, and the lithe spring of a seeking tiger. The two went down beneath the turning boots, and Randal baulked Murray's charge with his shoulder. Murray staggered sideways, and Randal saw Ormond's strong clean-cut face behind. His teeth caught on his lip as he wrenched Murray's hands from Art's sleeve.



"Take Pug if you want someone for your credit's sake," he said. "But I'm hanged if you'll touch Art Scannell."

Ormond had Roddy Duncan upright and half-sheltered by his arm. He paused one instant before buffetting out a track through the locked and reeking bodies.

"Randal—don't be a fool," he cried. "Murray has the law——"

Then the crowd surged in, and Randal understood through the whirl of blood-hot haste that Murray was struggling with swinging handcuffs. He heard the clink as they brushed Art's arm. He struck straight from the shoulder, and Murray dropped without remark. Then Randal beat a way out to the dark, and the far pure stars, and silence.

The unholy excitement that calls up the beast in man was abroad in the air, and Lou rode on the blast of it; gay, quick-fisted, and undistressed. The Packer, who nursed a twisted arm for a full three weeks, averred that it was Lou who brought peace at the dawning when he turned the mob into Phelan's bar for another round of nips, and helped Murray and two more to select the ringleaders where they lay in an unmoving slumber.

Randal came to Murray in the red morning. His lip was swelled, and he was not otherwise good to look on.

"It was I who floored you last night," he

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said. "Shall I show up at the court with the others?"

Murray walked with a stick, and his hand was skinned. He met Randal's eyes.

"No," he said.

Randal flushed.

"I'm not asking your confounded mercy," he said savagely.

"You wouldn't get it if you were. Took young Art home all right, did you?"

"Yes," said Randal, and turned on his heel. "Tell Ormond I came to give myself up," he added.

## CHAPTER VI

“You see, I’m only a station-hand, Effie.”

“Well, that’s all you were when I first loved you, silly boy.”

“It didn’t matter then. Nothing mattered. Now—it matters more than all the world besides.”

“It doesn’t! How can it? I like things to be just the same. The sunshine, and all the slope of yellow down to the creek, and you sitting up here just with me alone. I am I, and you are you; and we’ve got all the sun and the breezes to ourselves. And that is enough.”

“Is it? My little Effie—you don’t know——”

“Oh, look! There’s a butterfly! The first one of spring! Ah!”

Randal came to his feet as she sprang past him with the gladness of a child in her limbs and in her face. The spring air was blowing warm across the hill-top and the veined slopes to the westing, and the smell of young grass and brown earth came up from the paddock-flat where Moody and Lou were ploughing. The hog-backed range to the rightward was

puce and opal and blood-crimson, and on the spears of sunlight between the cabbage-trees the Red Admiral flickered like an elusive thought. Randal laughed when the little ringed fingers snatched for it, missed, and glanced in light again. Then he flung his cap, and brought the red-and-black flash to earth.

"What a baby you are, Effie! he said. "There's your plaything."

She cast herself on the tussock, slipping delicate fingers under the old soiled tweed.

"Stupid boy—what made you do that?"

"I thought you wanted it."

"Not like this—with a broken wing. You've spoilt it!"

She shook it off into the yellow spines, with a childish pout, and Randal's face was suddenly hard.

"Not the only broken thing I've given you, is it? You had better shake me off, too, Effie."

The sweet dark eyes were full of puzzlement, and the lip dropped.

"Guy—I never can understand you. I didn't mean anything——"

Randal kicked aside his gorse-knife—he had been cutting brush in the gully beyond—and dropped down beside her.

"Dearest—dear little girl, I know you didn't. I—sometimes wish you did. Effie, you are such a child, and I—oh, my little, lit-

tle Effie, what are we doing! What are we doing!"

"Being happy! That's enough for to-day, isn't it? Don't be such a dear old duffer, Guy."

She laid the drawn sword of a flax-leaf across his mouth, laughing. Randal caught her hand, gripping it fast.

"Listen," he said. "You are Life and Death and Heaven and Hell to me. And I—Heaven knows what I am to you. For I think that you don't know the meaning of those words yet, Effie."

"I—don't know. It doesn't matter, does it? I do love you, Guy."

Her sweet breath was on his cheek, and her soft troubled face was very close. Randal nearly laughed. Just so would she have spoken to her grandmother.

For an instant the mad longing was in him to teach her, somehow, some way, that passion which, once lit, burns to eternity on the very core of life itself. Already she had taught him all the unrest that is beyond a name. Already she had taught him such desire as will purge all dross from a man, or will kill him, body and soul. She touched his neck gently.

"Do—do you know what love really means, Guy?"

Unseen, below the forehead of the hill Lou was whistling as the plough wore round, and

the clank of tightening chains came up sharply. Randal moved.

"Do I know what love is? Yes; I know. Though you were long years dead, and just dust blown along the hills, I would feel you pass by on the wind. I would love you then as now——"

She ruffled up his hair with both upstretched hands, and her eyes were laughing.

"And how do you love me now?" she said.

And then Randal cast the honour that he had been rivetting behind him for a space; and it broke, as it had broken many times before, to be patched again through bitter nights of wakefulness.

A wedge of swan passed dumbly overhead, black on the daffodil sky. Along the crystal of the snow-hills the sunset poured, red as strong wine. The sharpness of it was in the air, and in Randal's heart. He heard Lou's laugh below as the leading-chains fell; and the tramp of the horses turning homeward.

"I work for your father," he said. "And I can't look him in the face. I meet Murray and Ormond, and others who are no better than I—was. And I can't look them in the face. For they know what I ought to be, and what I am. And do you think I don't know what they would call me if they knew—this?"

His arms were very close round her, and she smiled at him wonderingly.

"I don't understand," she said. "It doesn't make any difference really if they are in the house while you are in the whare. For you are a gentleman too, Guy."

"Effie, I think that I am not—or I would not be here. I am just drifting."

"Well, keep on drifting! I like you much better that way than when you want to stand on the other side of the road and touch your cap. And please, please don't bother about all the others days, Guy. There's just now—nothing else ever matters. And can't you fancy that the broom and manuka in the gully are buttercups and daisies, and we are just children home from school? And there's a wee, wee rabbit over on the sand-ridge! Come and we'll chase him home! Come!"

She darted across the tussock slope; and Randal picked up his gorse-knife and followed, the after-glow dark on his face.

Tod was hoarse with delight when Randal came into the whare at the dusk.

"Begorra; it's the fat luck laid thick ontu us this toime," he crowed. "Git to your pack-in' then, Randal, me boyo. Wirrasthrew, that niver a blackthorn grows woid in this bush at all! Cud I break Pug Chaney's head wid the fisht of me, du ye think now?"

"What is it?" demanded Randal.

Steve explained briefly.

"North-o'-Sunday. Four on us wi' drays ter git the totara fur the noo drawin'-room; Scannell wants it sharp. We're to give a hand if Purdey is pushed. Reckon it'll take all o' a week ter git it out."

"Who's to go?" asked Randal, with Effie's good-night yet warm on his lips.

"Me," cried Tod, swinging his legs from the table-edge. "An' yersilf. An' Steve an' Lou an' me. Och! Ye'd a right to be lookin' plazed, me hayro of war in the corner there! Throth! we'll be straightenin' Purdey's Camp till the mother of it wud pass it widout good-day. Ay, will we!"

"Purdey's Camp fights best when it's pure drunk," remarked Lou, biting an end of waxed thread from his half-mended saddle strap. "You'll find them slogging in up to the knocker, Tod, or Purdey's eye-teeth tell lies."

"Won't they be stoppin' for males, thin, at all, at all? Plaze the pigs I'll learn them to foight whin sober. Ah! bad luck to it! Why was not mesilf in the township that noight?"

The cook chuckled, dredging flour into a stew.

"There was a few there as is wishin' they wasn't, I'm thinkin'. Does Maiden run wi' the Lassie pack still, Steve?"

Steve was cobbling a patch in the shoulder-blade of his best waistcoat. A small darn Maiden had once made for him lay next it.



He jumped at her name, spearing his thumb with the big needle.

"Dunno," he said, in savage defiance. "Ask Lou. He sees more o' her than I does."

Lou drew a new thread through the wax with a rasping squeal.

"Tod's gone across to pack," he said. "If you fellows want to keep any of your belongings you'd best overhaul his swag. He was making off with my dungarees——"

"He's jest torn all ways wi' excitement," said Ted Douglas. "Keep an eye on him, Steve, or Purdey's Camp'll make him into paper pulp."

Tod had looked for battle since his petticoat days, and the joy of two fists put up opposite his own was greater to him than the love of woman and home. These are the men who tread out the ways, alone and reckless, that another man may build thereon. He descended on Purdey's Camp with challenge in his eye and in his shoulder-swing, and not all the long aching hours since sun-up had stiffened the clatter of his tongue.

Purdey met them at the door of his slab hut; read over Scannell's note, and gave verdict on the instant.

"Can't possibly get it all out this week," he said. "We only tapped the spur yesterday. You men will have to put your backs into it. Lou, you're good at team work. You and

Steve can go to the logging, and I'll put Pug and Webber on felling. Tod, you'd best take the cross-out. Mair will be your mate. He can wind any man in camp."

"Sure then there's a bloomin' knock-out waitin' for him, the gossoon," said Tod joyously. "For there is no toight-lacin' wid Scannell's men at all, at all."

Then Purdey glanced at Randal's sullen jaws and eyes, and swallowed a smile. Randal would work like a demon while this mood held him.

"Felling for you, too," he said. "And you'll find some tough stuff to bite on." He slid his hands in his trousers-pockets, looking on them with the bland grin of a child.

"I believe I saw some of you in that row in the township last month," he said. "You take your chances here, you know. I sack the first man who complains."

He turned into his hut, and Tod wriggled with thankful joy.

"Did I not tell ye we wud turn the Camp insoide out?" he cried. "Four of us, wid fishts all, and Lou havin' science to top up wid. Come on wid ye, now, whoile we give thim good-mornin'."

But the belt-rope of work ran rapid and unbroken on Purdey's Camp. Purdey's hand swayed each separate lever. At the tram-head the gangs felt it, where they wrought with the

lean rails and sleepers, driving Purdey's will through the bush-heart; where they served the double saws and the axe-blades, and fed sticks to the grips that gaped ever from the tail of the logging-tracks. The bench sawyers felt it, and the trolley-men; and each tailer-out and engine driver down to the least and clumsiest slabby that lumped in the mill.

One and all, they had no time to play with Tod, until the engine called time, and the mill-men slouched across to the huts set in the straggle of raped bush, and the cooking-smell rose on the blue keen air. Then the crowd came down from the tram-head; and the gum from bleeding timber was on hairy chests and hands, and the good sappy scents strong on their clothes.

Then Steve's heart leapt in him at sound of the bush-talk, which is a language all its own; and Lou sifted through the trampling vivid-voiced mob, picking sharpers and fools in an eye-blink; and Tod arranged three set-to's to come after the meal, and a double with Steve as partner.

"But you'd best not be servin' writs on Purdey," warned Chessin. "He's got the devil's own science, an' a little more o' his own. Saw him put Pug to sleep wonst for cheekin' him."

There was the grate of pride in Chessin's tone. For the bushmen are men, and they

will not serve less than a man. And, one and altogether, they will choose a beating in fair ding-dong fight before the easy handling a weak soul may give.

Tod blinked round the clearing where a full hundred men from the ends of earth struck the great bass chord of virulent life above the tender treble of the wind passing in the tree-tops.

“Wid the four of us—takin’ come-an-go-agin—I think we can manage to howld up to the week-indin’,” he said.

From Purdey’s Camp a twelve-mile tram-line ran up to the terminus. The rails were of wood, and warped by the frost. They were hog-backed over the creeks and gullies, and sinfully greasy in rain. But there, and in the clashing mills, Purdey’s men made few mistakes. For Purdey had the knack of rousing their pride, and pride carries weight with all men who are worthy the name.

Steve roused next morning to the scream of the mill-engines, and the snarl of waking saws. He fought in the man-choked rough-slabbed hut for sea-pie and mutton through the blank chill that goes before dawn, and took the first jigger that sat on the line while the sunrise was drowsy and faint on the tree-tops. For already the bush was calling with the witchery of shaken sunbeams on the laughing brown-eyed cheeks, and the trembling sweet

silences of frail ferns that have not seen the day.

No man bred in the streets and the sheltered ways may know the glorious merciless joy that follows the first sob of the blade into green unhandled timber. And though an axeman be past all but the blurred memory, he will turn at that sound from all other music that earth may hold. For the bush is the Eternal Artist whose work no man makes sensuous or coarse, and to them that love her she gives that intuition which gets behind mystery and unbelief to prove that God has made in His own image the Almighty Peace which He lays on Nature the round world through.

In the cook-hut someone was bawling for a stolen crib. The clank of steel burred sharp on the air as a tram-horse bucked in the traces. Lou came over the beaten clearing with his long whip in his arm-pit, and swung to the jigger as Hoffman got it under way. His knee brushed Steve's when he took the place opposite, and his gay chaff flicked the man at his side to haste. Steve lay to the handles in dogged silence. True hate marches ever with fear to goad it, and, for Maiden's sake, Steve feared and hated Lou.

One by one the jiggers crawled out behind, strung along the grey line like shifting beads on a string. The utter peace of the morning broke under the grate of wheels and the deep

chest-breathing that carried light snatches of song. The tinkle of frost-thinned creeks murmured alongside, and shy tentative trills and flutters in the deeps of the scented gullies told to men that the birds were mating.

Lou swung forward, and his breath brushed Steve's face. It was whiskey-tainted; but his eyes were clear blue as the sky, and the white skin that showed where the loose shirt gaped was no whiter than his even teeth.

"It's nice to think we're good friends, isn't it?" he said. "There's whips of places on a logging-track where a man might come to grief—by accident."

The mockery of the light tone hit Steve. He gripped at the handles.

"I never had nuthin' ter do wi' them kind o' accidents," he answered.

"Nor I." Lou blinked up at the welter of gold in the branches. "Hear that tui! He's making love to his mate. D'you think he'll ever get her, Steve? They are clumsy beggars, you know."

"Id is nod dey is de only clumsy beggar," growled Hoffman. "You did near haf us ofer der culvert! Sit oop, man, und put your back into id."

The jigger rocked round a steep angle, and Lou swung to balance with the ease of the saddle-bred. Right and left the old logging-tracks lay on the slopes. In years past they

too had waited; ripped, raw, and bleeding, in the dews of the maiden bush, for the cleft hoofs to beat them to barren clay. Now the jiggers flashed from them to new life that called; and to their nakedness and poverty of rotting stumps the lawyer-thorn and vagrant convolvulus gave pity and careless covering.

For a full hour, as the sun warmed and the black gullies waked, the jiggers swarmed upward; labouring along the steep grades, and dipping with swallow-flight to the sturdy bridges that spanned creek and gully and swamp. And then the heart-hunger that jagged Randal always gave before the joy of the axe-helve cold in his hand, and the crackle of underbrush as the men crashed through and away from the life and the noise at the tram-head.

With the instinct which Purdey called a power of the devil, Punch Reynolds could nose out the best timber through the bitterest country that ever broke a man's heart. He stormed the totara spur, quick-glancing in the shadows for each bole that would run a decent three feet across. Randal and his squad crashed after, obeying the sharp wood-pecker tap of the blaze; and before the axe swung for the scarf the clearers were under his feet, with long knives for the vine and young sapling. Cox ruled the next gang.

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"Scannell wants fifteen feets," he said. "That stick'll cut two—and that."

He scored the mark and passed, swearing at the wide-branched tops. For these shouted of second-class timber from each ruddy knot.

Lou swung his team where the great white chips flew, and the blue flame lit his eyes as Tod and Mair sprang back with the cross-cut. For the tree stood one tense second, then leapt on its stump; roaring headlong through the lighter timber, and bringing Steve to earth with a stray branch.

Steve picked himself up, wiped the blood from his neck with his sleeve, and backed his team to the stick Cox had marked.

"I'll come back fur the chap as floored me when it's ready," he said. "What made yer fell the sloven end that a-way, Tod, yer animal?"

Tod lent his weight to the grip where Steve struggled with it.

"Begad; I cudn't git the thing to turn a somersault, at all, at all," he declared. "Maybe it's easier drawin' from the little ind, boy, dear."

"Yer a fool," proclaimed Pug, lifting the iron grip as he would have lifted a pair of scissors, and casting it into place. "Git a move on wi' them brutes there."

The chains shrieked as the strain fell on them; the grip bit and held in the bleeding



wood, and the bullocks grunted with fore-bent shoulders as the great bole drew slowly from its port.

The logging-way was a cross between a skittle-alley and the 'tween-deck promenade of an ocean tramp. It was moist and chill as the grave, and very nearly as dark. Steve wound into it, where the dank smells and the utter silence gave him creeps up his spine, and the jar of the log on the iron earth and the creak of the twisting yokes sounded hideously loud and unfamiliar. Veil on veil of wide wet spider webs broke before the slow horns, and underfoot the young springs gave up their lives in splintered glass. Far above, where the sun was, a handful of moko-mokos made their prayer to God. Then behind, from mouth of the track, Lou's whistle soared up to catch the falling notes: but to neither man was there aught of hymn in it. The tune broke to words that stung Steve with their rollicking derision.

"I know she likes me! I know she likes me,  
Because she says so——"

Came a sudden clatter, hurried oaths, the curse of the whip; once and thrice. Then a full-lunged shout of command:

"Steve! Make way there! Make out! They've bolted!"

Steve stood. And there was all of the devil in his face. When that bolting team crashed

full-speed into the great butt at his elbow, forty pounds worth of bullocks would go—twice that, and perhaps more. For this was Purdey's best team, and Purdey was a hard man. Without any doubt Lou would disappear before payment was called, and Maiden—— The thoughts ran with the swiftness of a main-spring unloosed. Then the message of the bush went home. Steve jumped for his team, cut the whip on the rumps, on the quivering flanks, on the nozzles that dripped and blew wide with terror. The log canted and groaned as the brutes sprang; swayed to a clumsy trot; to a canter, and blundered down the steep grade with the grip live-leaping behind. Steve half-swung to the yoke, grimly beating a lag-gard about the head.

“Ten ter one he'll git pinched ef they strike—comin' that pace, too. He must be hold-in' ter 'em. Gosh! He kin swear!”

The off-leader pecked, and Steve's whip snarled under the wrist-work that had peeled skin in straight lines from more than one bolting piker. The sidling was greasy in clay. Now again it was corduroy that jarred Steve's spine, and rough-rolling stones giving no foothold. Steve's breath came in groans, and sweat ran down his face. Yet—because of that something in man which forces him to be true against his will—he flung all power of body and mind to his labour.

The leaders took a corner too fine. The log grunted, swung, and grounded across the track, jamming between stiff tuke-tuke saplings. Steve's heart leapt in his throat as he sent a glance up the track. For down the greasy sidling Lou's team was coming at a swinging gallop, and the grip bounded in the air, unsteadied by any weight whatever.

"Lost 'is log, has he? Grip slipped—my soul! he'll pay for't in a minute."

Then Steve stood aside, helpless, while the other man gave payment.

Lou's right hand was as a twitch on the foremost red nostril, and the brute had its head up, bellowing with pain. Two chains; one; then the charge hit the four-foot totara fair, and crumbled.

Lou found foothold, cat-like, diving in where the fallen leaders writhed, and the eight behind bunched upon them. The flurry of sweat-caked bodies and tossing horns and reddened strained eyes made the very gateway of the Pit, and that gate fell half-open for Lou as he struggled, cursing, with the chains. Quite clearly Steve saw him go down where the hoofs beat. Quite clearly he remembered Lou's face as he kissed Maiden's hand in the crush.

"Curse him," he said, "now an' always!" Then he went in and brought the man out.

Lou's left sleeve was ripped to the shoulder,

and a stray horn had run out a trench up the flesh beneath. His face was curd-white under the bloody spume that flecked it, and he staggered, half-blind and sick.

"Get out," he said, when Steve would have strapped the torn flesh. "Lend a hand with these brutes before they kick themselves into blazes."

They took the danger shoulder to shoulder, without speech and without hesitation. But the sweat of pain ran down Lou's face, and Steve's grip on the hooks was unsteady.

When the log was freed and Steve's team under way again, Lou spoke with tight lips, and the red dripping from his cuff-band to the dust.

"I'm taking all that can walk back for my log. But you needn't try to trap me again, for I'll be coming too slow next time."

Steve straightened as under a whip-cut. The savage showed for a flash in his honest broad face.

"By ——! you'll pay for that when yer got two hands agin, Lou Birot! Don't go thinkin' as I'll furgit——"

"I don't mean you to forget," said Lou; but his light defiance crumbled, and he steadied with an effort.

Something fought with the hate in Steve.

"Yer can't go back, Lou. Yer ain't fit. Yer can't swing a whip——"

"Do you want to feel if I can't?" demanded Lou, and his eyes were wicked absolutely.

Steve went, never looking back. Lou turned to his team. The leaders were dying where they stood, brought to their feet only by the point of the knife. The power of it goaded them into the under-scrub at the track-side, where they pitched sideways among soft-headed moss and maiden-hair and the flower of the wild strawberry to meet death with wrath and black pain.

Three hours later Lou brought his shrunk team down to the tram-head. There was a heathenish bandage round his arm, and a tourniquet hugging the thick of it. He crawled up the logging-bank, cast off the grip opposite the waiting trolley, stumbled into a ganger's hands, and lay there.

Purdey bound the wound that night with the tenderness of a woman. Then he tongue-lashed Lou into white fury before all the Camp. For carelessness was the unforgivable sin beyond North-of-Sunday, and without doubt, Lou's grip had never been properly set. Tod carried the truth back to Mains—with a couple of black eyes as a voucher.

"Be aisy till I tell you, thin," he said. "Sure, it's the unnathural ugly objic' Pug Chaney is when he comes out of the ind of a mill wid Steve to do the clappin' on him. Bedad, it's Steve is the quare ould slogger an' all of it!

Clane and clever he is, and Lou'll have to be takin' afther the devil what owns him to turn Steve over whin they putt up their hands. An' that'll be all to watch! It is not Lou takes the whip-cut widout lookin' for the hand what gives it. No—sorra a fear will Lou do that!"

"But it was Purdey rowed him," said Ike. "Even Lou must see that."

Tod looked at him pityingly.

"May ye git your health till ye grow sinse," he said. "Musha! Ye've a right to live to a quare ould age, I'm thinkin'."

## CHAPTER VII

THE dust was bone-white on the road that boot, hoof and wheel had scored over. The hot day held a taint of Nor'west, and the new-clothed poplars along the sale-yard fence propped a sky blue and vivid as sapphire. The yards were without shade; breathless, clogged by panting sheep and restless-eyed cattle, and broken and unbroken horses. The air was rank with the smell of them, and with the smell of cheap tobacco and beer and mole-skins and leather: for the township lay just round the corner, and the drovers sat along the rails with the give-and-take talk of a month in their mouths, and the high-pitched clatter of the auctioneers to deaden it.

Danny detached himself from a knot of women by the poultry-crates and climbed the rail beside Hynes, the Behar cook who had come down from the hills to get a tooth pulled. With Lou, Danny had brought over a draught of steers at daybreak, and the stockwhip round his arm showed wet hairs on it yet.

"Pic-nics they was ter land, too," explained Danny, ramming twist into his half-bitten

pipe. "See me talkin' ter Mrs. Blaine over there? Two on 'em got waltzin' round her back-yard, an' I'm goffered ef she didn't go fur 'em proper wi' the fryin'-pan. Clouted 'em over the head all seraphic, she did."

"Jimmie cud 'a' done well wi' some o' his mother's spare pluck," said Hynes. "An' what'll he be sayin' 'bout old Buggy, I wonder?"

Danny sucked fire into his pipe, and killed the match between slow fingers.

"Devil knows," he said soberly. "I'm concludin' as Jimmie don't—ner won't yet a bit. He's been cleanin' up the last o' the rabbitin' fur Robertson back o' All Alone sence Scannell sacked him. 'Tain't much news he'll be gittin' there 'cept what the wekas an' keas has on tap."

"Rum thing o' Ted Douglas ter git his mate sacked that a-way," said Pavit. "I can't understand it myself."

Pavit was a muddy dredge-hand from the Glory, and he sat the rail with his long hip-boots swinging, and the yellow clay caked on his cap. Danny turned on him fiercely.

"Never s'posed yer cud! It takes a man ter understan' a man. What'd Ted hev done wi' Lou and Scott an' them rotters ef he hadn't played the game? Can ye consplain that, now?"

"Jimmie was the wust rotter o' the lot, any-



ways," said Lossin, comfortably, and Hynes added:

"Same here. I'll eat me false teeth if it weren't Jimmie as sucked poor old Buggy dry an' lef' him ter starve——"

"Ted's runner-up fur them stakes——" began Garron, and staggered back as Danny leapt for him.

"Tell him that ter his face, will yer, ye ——? An' if he leaves the two jaws on yer it'll be so as yer kin beg his pardon the way he kin onnerstan' it! Ted! Ted Douglas! Doesn't we know——"

"As he an' Jimmie was the on'y two old Buggy'd ever hev inside his door," ended Garron, holding the little man off. "And there's one on 'em wheeled all his rhino outer him, poor old fool. An' 'Dun't you throw it up ter the lad,' says he. 'He was kind ter the old man,' says he."

"Old ass, he should have said," amended Hynes. "But Murray ain't sure, else why is he grubbin' high and low fur inflammation 'fore he knows if it's wuth while ter bring Ted in from his musterin' er Jimmie from All Alone?"

"Old Buggy knowed it was Ted, or would he have died with his mouth shut?" said Garron departing; and Lossin came into the talk.

"What d'yer expect ter git fur them steers, Danny?"

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Danny showed a rip in his trouser-leg, and spat emphatically.

"Some more o' that if we got ter deliver 'em. Scannell expects four-ten, and Pike don't elucidate to it. He's givin' Art the wet side of his tongue over it, I guess."

Two yards off was Art Scannell with his dogs at heel and a red-whiskered man opposite. Art was booted and breeched, and his dark delicate face and small head carried the charm and the grace of his sister. But his walk and his speech were uncertain, and the pupil of his eye too dull. Danny watched the rising storm cheerfully, and he chuckled as Art kicked his dogs apart and moved off with a curt-flung sentence.

"Sell 'em himself, will he? I seen him do that wonst. I seen him balustradin' on the rails sellin' pigs. 'One-four,' he yells out; 'one-four—one-four,' and smack! over he pitches atop of the pigs, an' old Backrip, he yells out—'Darn it, Art, but it's one for you this time.' Then Randal—being allers superfloos—goes in an' yanks him out an' cleans him down. That's young Art doin' sellin'."

The Packer stuck his lean eagle-face over Hynes' shoulder.

"There ain't no men these days," he said. "We cud drink proper when I was young. Big Jos Creer—you know Jos?"

Danny nodded. Jos Creer's name was green up in the shut miners' cemetery on the hill, with the date 1869 against it.

"He was a man," said Packer. "I seen him knock down a twenty-cheque in Mullin's bar—wot stood where the Crescent dredge is now—an' go straight away out an' carry a sack o' flour two mile over the hill ter Chinaman's Gully fur a bet. An' the hills reekin' wi' shafts and scrub in those days, not to be speakin' o' cows strayed off of the commonage. That's what I calls a man."

"That's what I calls a fool," said Danny, politely, and cast himself headlong through six wedges of men to drag a fox-terrier off the ear of his blue Smithfield. The fox-terrier belonged to Roddy Duncan, who had come up from the township with Art, and it was Murray's crisp tones that cut the wrangle in half. Roddy was more flushed and excited than he should have been; but he straightened before the keen eyes, for they wore the look of the hunter of men.

"What yer after?" said Danny, recovering his temper.

"Dick Wepeha. Sheep-stealing—again. Danny, can you tell me the brands and ear-marks of Jackson's new draught—an' anything about Behar or Mackay's?"

Danny knew the signs of all sheep within fifty miles. Each holder in the distance de-

sired him for a day or an hour at branding-time, and—came the sheep in a mixed draught from Westland or Wairarapa or Nelson—Danny laid his finger unerringly on each, and told off the present owner. Every man has his own gift to cultivate. Danny had cultivated his into genius. It was polyglot jabber to Roddy; but Murray jotted it down, quick-fingered.

“Thanks,” he said, snapping his note-book. “I might find some stray skins round Dick’s paddocks.”

“Yer keep yer eyebrows shiftin’ for Pipi Wepeha,” said Danny, wisely. “He curses chaps as he don’t like.”

“We all do that,” said Murray, and laughed.

“Yer conspirin’ enough ter know the differ when a old Maori tohunga starts that game, ain’t yer?” demanded Danny, tartly. “If Pipi puts his foolery on ter you, Murray, yer’ll smart fur it.”

“Bah!” said Murray, and swung off, clean-limbed and alert.

Roddy, having fear of all things which he did not understand, fed that fear on all possible occasions.

“W-what would Pipi do?” he asked nervously.

Lou’s clear laugh sounded behind him.

“Do? He’d put makutu on him for a start. Then Murray——”

“Shut it, Lou, an’ don’t go swabbin’ what brains he’s got out o’ him——”

But Lou backed to the fence, crossed his legs, and began to speak slowly, his hands in his pockets, and a half-score men listening. And he did not guess he was loosening the sod for more graves than one. Lou came from the North, where the pakeha learns the beliefs and the hates of the Maori, on land soaked in the blood of both races; and what he had to tell he told cleverly, to trouble the wide-eyed boy before him. So that in the end Roddy went away, sick and shaken; and giddy with the unfolding of a horror too vivid for his sensitive brain.

“Brute yer are, Lou,” said Danny, fiercely; and Lou grinned, filling his pipe.

“Tell you, it’s a real joke to rattle that kid. He gathers up every egg you chuck at him, and sits on it.”

“He’ll hatch trouble out o’ that one, belike,” said Hall. “’Tain’t right——”

“Bah! Those steers are sold, Danny, so we’re right; and that’s all I care about. Let the kid go to blazes if he likes.”

Roddy chased his shadow swiftly up the white road. At the corner Gordon’s wife stood at a cottage-door, merry-eyed and cleanly, with children tumbling at her feet. The scent of hawthorn came over the gate with her voice.

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"Roddy! Tell Gordon to hurry up home. I got a bit o' chicken for his tea."

Roddy grunted reply without looking up, and tramped on. Over the tussock hill the sunset lay red, and the cool of the spring evening grew as the Nor'west died. Roddy climbed the stiff slope with its needly spines, beat through gorse and broom until the thunder of the dredges in Changing Creek filled the air, and the tent that he shared with Fysh showed in the shingle gully at his feet. By the fire Fysh was feeding already. He paused with his knife at his mouth to say:

"Yer ain't got much time ter go wastin', kid."

Roddy poured strong tea from the billy; drank again and again; clawed oilskins and long boots from beneath the bunk, and fixed on a loose button with wire. Fysh ate with noise and cheerful haste, and Roddy's nerves twitched in irritation and disgust.

"Did yer tell Ormond 'bout that shovel yer broke the 'andle off of?" demanded Fysh, licking the sugar out of his pannikin audibly.

"Curse the shovel," said Roddy.

Fysh stared. Then he rose and boxed Roddy's ears.

"I got 'nother 'and for the other side if you give me any back-talk," he said. "Come up out o' that, an' get to yer work."

Roddy followed over the hill uncaring;

jumped the five-foot tail-race with a stagger; dragged on the hip-boots and the oilskins, and stood by the boxes until the moment when Gordon should toss him the shovel. The Lion had been ground-sluicing these seven months, and Roddy loathed box-work above all things invented. He turned his back on the jet and the great sullen pipes, and stared downhill at the yellow of the tail-race where it touched the zinc-blue of the Creek. In the manuka below he heard the complaining voice of Kiliat, and Ormond's quick virile answers. Then the wet shovel met his hands, and his eyes fell on the boxes mechanically.

There was heavy stuff coming down, and the shake of the trestles and the spume of the water made him giddy. Twice the race ran abrim, choking. Once she slopped over with a roar that brought Kiliat up to see. He said that to Roddy which set the boy's fingers itching on the shovel and his eyes drawing to the sleek head under the check cap. Ormond guessed the desire for connection, and sympathised.

"Sheer clumsiness and inattention," wound up Kiliat. "I've had my eye on you for some time; and—ah—I could do your work better myself."

"Do it, then," said Roddy, and cast down the shovel.

Ormond was weary and irritated himself;

but there was that in Roddy's face which made him anxious.

"Pick that up and go on with your work," he said, sharply. "Leave him alone, Kiliat, and go an' spring your little jokes on someone else. Roddy hasn't any sense of humour."

"He has insulted me," raved Kiliat.

"You'd better go and handle a slave-gang if you want soft answers to your lip. Roddy won't offend again. I'll vouch for him. Good-night."

But Ormond had stern words for the boy when Kiliat had gone.

"If you play up with your work and your masters as you are doing, you'll find yourself fired out very shortly," he said. "Art Scannell's to blame for this, I suppose——"

"He's my mate," said Roddy, sullenly.

"Then your mate will have to find you another billet before long, if you're not careful. Remember what I say, Roddy. If I sweat myself I make my men sweat too, and you haven't tightened your traces this fortnight."

He left Roddy alone in the darkening night, with the work that took toll of the boy's body and freed his mind to search in morbid terror through Lou's words. Down in the desolate creek-bed each clump of flax and slender cabbage-tree was alive with its Maori birthright of mystery and gloom, and the roar of the water shut him in on himself relentlessly.



The pale saffron of the after-glow called Ormond from his hut to the power-house. Here he switched on the electric light, locked the door, and went over to Fysh at the jet. The spark of light jumped before him from lamp to lamp, shutting out the wild hills of dead manuka and distance with a solid wall of black. Under the near lamp-post the jet sputtered from a four-inch nozzle, scoring up the rock and down as Fysh's hand swayed it. Ormond watched for two minutes with keen eyes and tight lips. He had been up at the penstock all day, and that was an eighteen-mile walk all told. The clipped hour since his return had been crowded with Kiliat's complaints; and Ormond steadied himself under the light before he trusted his voice to speak.

The rock shivered where the jet struck it, and sunk forward in a puddle of yellowish wash. Fysh dipped his wrist a fraction, and the water dug out a big manuka bush, tossing it over into the night beyond. Then the steady roar blattered on rock again, sending a comb of white smoke above the light-arc.

"What's all that waste water doing round the junction?" demanded Ormond, bringing his mouth to the other's ear.

"She's leakin'," explained Fysh.

"Leaking! The ——! Why, you're using the second head, you eternal ——!" Ormond jumped for the two-way cock. "Get up to the

other nozzle, I tell you." He swung the handles round with a jerk, and at the ceasing of the thunder Fysh spoke.

"Kiliat said as we was to use this beast;" he shook the dribbling nozzle: "said as how it was bigger."

"Kiliat be—oh, all right. He didn't know it was leaking, I suppose. Change over. Keep her at that, and I'll overhaul this in the morning. Just the bolts worked loose, I expect."

Fysh sniggered as he turned, and Ormond's hands came out of his pockets in a flash. But he dropped them, swung on his heel, and tramped through clayey mullock until the tail of light flickered out over yellow wash in the boxes and the white of Roddy's face. The understanding of Fysh's half-laugh sung through Ormond's head, and brought a roughness to his voice.

"Roddy! There's heavy stuff in the corner. Watch it below the half-way, for one ripple is cracked."

"Yes," said Roddy, and hopped into the boxes, loosing a block with one masterly kick of the shovel.

Ormond dropped his head on his chest, and went down-hill with a sure swift foot among the raffle of dead scrub and fallen-in shafts and stones. The grate of wash and the snarl of the jet passed out behind, and down on the level of the Changing Creek was pale star-

light and a muggy chill dampness. He slung along the half-yard track under the bank, and came to the two dredges that sat at the corner, glaring electric light, and pouring out muddy water unendingly. Ormond cursed their fat squat prosperity, swung himself up to the gorse and broom of the hill-top, took the township street at its lower end, and hammered on Father Denis' door. A candle glimmered in the dark passage, and Ormond spoke to the glint of it.

"Anyone here, Father? I'm coming in to talk."

The priest's quick ear caught the tension in Ormond's tone. He laid a fat hand on the door, and shut it.

"There is not, then. I'm just after finishing me tea—you'll wait for a pipe, Ormond? Sure, you've let me smoke alone these ten nights. Busy? Uh-h! When were ye anything else? Not that chair. Ye cracked it last toime wid yer fooleries—there's tobacco behind ye, man. Aye; that tin's the brand ov yer own."

Ormond lit up with unsteady hands, drawing the life in broken, impatient puffs. Father Denis lowered his bulk into the worn leathern chair opposite, and made a blue veil of smoke between the two. For a good pipe loosens the tongue and shelters the face: and these are the two essentials for an unburdening of the spirit.

The little bee-clock on the mantel-shelf made troubled conversation, and once in every few minutes a cart rattled an answer from the street. The fire-light was on Father Denis' treasures; and the face of the girl on the wall laughed once, as though, from across the Great Space, she saw and approved the shaping of the lives before her. But the two men smoked silently.

The priest moved first; grunted; heaved himself forward in his chair.

"If I were behind the gratin', Ormond, I'd have ye up tu the confessional in less toime than this. Have ye killed a directhor, then?"

Ormond started. Then he recrossed his legs and lay back.

"Oh, it's only the same old thing;" his voice was carefully careless. "Don't you know what I've come to you for? You can't do anything."

"I don't mean tu thry, sure. The sowls ov men take all the tinkerin' I can give widout goin' sakin' tu the dredges an' sluices."

"You'd find your work cut out if you came seeking to the Lion," said Ormond, bitterly. "She's going to pieces. To pieces, poor old girl! Just for want of a little of the money those confounded directors are sucking out of her. I've written to them;" he sat up, and his words came with a rush. "I've written and written. And I've laced Bert Kiliat till I mar-

vel that he doesn't try to stoush me. I sometimes wish he would."

"I believe ye," said Father Denis dryly.

"Heaven knows how he has the face to call himself a manager. Manager! Taking it all through, he doesn't put in more than one half-day a week at the claim. One half-day! Then he goes back to the hotel, or up to the Scannells', and writes up reports. Manager! There's not a sluicing-hand in all Otago knows less about hydraulics than he does."

O' coorse. Every man wud like tu be the handle ov the spade. It's niver that easy worrking wid a fut on yer shoulder all the day. But there's betther men than yersilf done ut, Ormond."

"I don't want to be the handle. D'you think I'm minding what it is to me? Kiliat can call me a digger instead of working overseer, if it pleases him. I don't care. But it's the old Lion herself—the claim—and all the shareholders who will suffer for this rotting. That's what's driving me wild!"

He flung through the half-lighted room restlessly. The priest bit his thumb-nail and frowned. He was a worker himself, and he understood.

"Can't ye git howld on the bhoys anyways? A man in his sines wud see ye can't worrk a claim widout money, sure."

"They are not in their senses, then I sup-

pose. They are idiots. Blind, deaf idiots—and I wish to Heaven they were dumb too. They stew away in their own juice down in town, an' put all my letters in the waste-paper basket. What? Bert Kiliat's the only one of 'em all who has been up to see it, and he's about as much good as a sick-headache. His father has told him that expenses must be kept down. That's all he can say when I show him a leaky pipe spitting like a cat. Curse him!"

"Tut-t-t!"

"I beg your pardon, Father. But—you don't see the futile puerility of it all. Twenty-three miles of race, and two and three quarters of pipes, and a twelve-inch plant. I tell you, it needs constant outlay to keep it in order. And this has had nothing spent on it for a year. I'm sick of asking——"

Ormond came back to the mantel-shelf, crossed his arms on it, and dropped his head. His nerves were strung to the tightness which in a woman would be hysteria. Father Denis got up heavily, and put his hands on the stooped shoulders.

"There's no credit owin' ye in takin' yer whippin', Ormond. We all have tu du that wan toime or another. Bhut ye can boite on the bullet, can't ye? Or there's nothin' of a man tu ye bhut the clothes."

Ormond did not move. He was squarely and strongly built, with the spade fingers and

lean set jaw of the practical engineer. But to-night he was weak as a little child. Just the half-laugh of one of the men that he ruled had overset his strength for the time.

"It's a great thing to be a man, isn't it?" he said, indistinctly. "And to slave out your soul to do your work honestly—and to get no credit—no help——"

"This isn't the talk ye gave Randal an' me once, Ormond. Where's yer belief in yersilf gone tu, bhoy?"

Ormond laughed hysterically.

"Oh, go on! Go on! Tell me how much we've got to thank God for!"

"Ut's yersilf hasn't much, if that's all the spirit that's in ye. Let it go, then. Ut's a man's work, an' not yours at all, at all."

Father Denis knew when to use the whip. But it did not rouse Ormond.

"I can't," he said. "I've given her so much that I—I can't go back on her. She's had seven years of my life, and I believe she knows it. I could never work for another claim as I've worked for her. You don't know what it is to fight for her back in the hills when the rains are stripping the faces, and there's an even chance of losing half the race in a few minutes. I've done that six times this year. And the flume up near the pent-stock is getting shaky—I was up to my middle in it most of to-

day. That accounts for the drivel I'm talking. Why don't you kick me out, Father?"

"Faith! there's niver an inch of ye softer than the toe of me boot—unless ut's yer head. Ye've got somethin' out of servin' the Lion, Ormond."

"Yes," said Ormond. He picked up his pipe, and sat down again, laughing half-ashamed. "For a chap has no right to kick up a shine over his daily work," he said.

Then as the light caught the priest's face, he added quickly: "You've a trouble of your own to-night, Father?"

"I have, then. Did ye hear ov ut? A sob blows news quicker than ahl the laughs of the worrld will du—aye; ye foight for yer iron scrapin's an' driftwud wid Nature, Ormond. I'm foightin' worse down here—wid the divil thrippin' sowls be the heels, an' ahl the evil ov the earth tu give power tu his elbow when ut's needed."

"What is it?" asked Ormond, blowing the smoke aside.

"Ould Buggy was found dyin' in his bed this mornin', along—ye know the lonely road where he lived? Clane starved tu a shtick he was, wid niver a penny an' niver a crust tu bless him. An' he that kep a servant an' was rowlin' in money."

"Poor old beggar! What'd he done? Sunk it in mines?"



“Ut is Jimmie Blaine or Ted Douglas sunk ut for him. Niver a man he let into his dure bhut they two an’ his body-servant. An’ sorra a truth cud they git out ov him. ‘Niver scowld the lad,’ he says. Bhut which lad he niver said. Sapped him dhry, and left him tu starve. Ut’s Jimmie they’re blamin’—I had the ould mother ov him down on me just now. He’s the only choild she iver had—saints help her!”

“Which does Murray think it was?”

“Sure did ye iver know Murray say what he did not want tu? He is on the thrack ov some-thin’—an’ Jimmie is wan ov me own bhoys. If ut is him, I’ll break his head on him though he comes tellin’ me at the Confessional—God forgive me. And yit—if ut’s because I’ve failed somewhere in me duty——”

“That’s rot,” said Ormond promptly. “You’ve got the heart of every Roman in the district—and of half the other denominations too. You just spend yourself for them, Father——.”

“And wudn’t I du ut twice over—for ivery mother’s son ov thim?” The yearning tenderness of his face shook his voice, and Ormond’s eyes drew unthinkingly to the picture on the wall. “Aye, luve shpells bigger worrds than the four letthers ov ut’s name—how’s that bhoy ov yours that Randal shpoke tu ye about?”

“I’ve switched him on to night-duty, and he doesn’t like it. And I’ve rowed him, and he

doesn't like that. I can't do more. A chap isn't responsible for his men when they're not under his eye."

"Bedad! if more ov ye were ut'd be a different worrld from wan round corner tu the other! Du ye iver see Randal these days?"

"Sometimes. He's granite. I'll never get any hold on him, Father."

"He's been hoeing a shtiff row of his own if there's anything in township talk. Ormond, if iver he comes tu ye for help, give ut. He will not be comin' tu many, that same bhoy."

"All right. It's not likely, though." Ormond got up, and shook himself. "I must scoot, Father. And—I wish I hadn't worried you to-night."

The priest looked round the low room with the dance of the fire in its corners.

"It'll be a bad day for me when I turnd me face from a man wantin' annythin' that I can give tu him," he answered.

## CHAPTER VIII

BLAKE'S bar-parlour was empty, with fire-light cloaking the grease-stains on the walls, and the rings that the glasses and jugs had scored on the table. It was Lou who strolled in, unobserved, through the side-door, picked an accordeon out of the wood-box, and began to make music in the shadows. Strictly speaking, the accordeon belongs to hot evenings outside the whares, and the smoke and talk of loafing shearers, with the murmur of penned sheep to help out the halt of stiffened fingers. Or to black nights round the camp-fires, where the "honk, honk" of wild swan and the sudden slow roar of a landslip far up in the ranges are familiar as the old simple tunes. Or to dances in the Town Hall, with a girl to laugh back when Danny or Trefusis bang at "Daisy Ball" from the platform, and the throb of feet covers the bass. But the accordeon in Lou's hands was a vivid restless something that roused strange unnameable desires and longings, such as no plain working man had any right to. For, everything having its compensations, evil done may teach a man the way to the heart-

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strings of his kind when a better duller soul draws blank.

Lossin came in from the bar, and blattered the fire into blaze with his heel.

"Yer too bloomin' uncanny fur the dark, Lou," he said. "Sing us somethin' rousin', can't yer?"

Lou flung out "Nazareth" in a rollicking waltz with the double bass, and, Murray, on his way up to bed, came in to expostulate. For he had not quite forgot the reverence of his childhood. But instead, he stared at Lou in the light, saying:

"Heavens above, man! What old shaft have you been falling into?"

Lou's forehead carried six colours, and his jaw was cut. Moreover, his clean-shaped nose looked lumpy. Ten voices gave virile explanation, and Murray picked up understanding piecemeal.

"What does Steve look like?" he asked.

"Faix, the divil'll mend Lou fust," cried Tod. "Did I not tell ye we wud git somethin' out of North-o'-Sunday? Throth an' bedad, Scannell will be like to putt you both out of that supposin' there's anny more of it."

"And where do I come in?" demanded Murray, sizzling a wet boot-sole on the bars.

The laughing mock of the music caught Lou's voice as he answered:

"Next time. There'll be one of us to run

to earth then, Murray—and a pop-gun or two at the end of it.”

“My lad, you’re a rip,” muttered Murray underbreath. “And Father Denis wants the handling of you! He’ll need gloves for it!”

Guise pushed open the side-door, and blinked round the room uncertainly. He was a “remittance man,” and that carries its own stigma in the Colonies.

“Blanky Revivalist Meeting?” he inquired politely. “Who’s doin’ the prayin’?”

“I am,” said Mogger. “Me dad’s talkin’ o’ marryin’ agin, an’ I’m prayin’ fur suthin’ as’ll stop him. Two granddads an’ a granny! I got the up-keep o’ them a’reddy. I can’t stand any more.”

Guise crossed to Roddy’s corner, and his blaring voice rose.

“I’ll show yer suthin’ as I can’t stand any more. Git out o’ this, you flappin’ box-man! Think I sat wi’ my head agin that wall for six years ter be turned out by you!” He caught Roddy by the collar, forcing his startled face to the grease-smudge on the wall. “Think I hall-marked it that way fur you?”

Tod received Roddy as Guise punted him across the room, and gave him the space on the floor between his own boots and Murray’s. There was neither authority nor conversation in Murray this night. He was dog-tired after a bitter ten days’ chase which had brought Dick

Wepeha to justice, and the warmth of the fire was grateful. Tod's soft brogue cut the smoke-reek.

"It is not wid elber-grease ye wud be after makin' a mark annywhere, Guise, me bos-thoon," he remarked.

Lou grinned above the low-breathed accordeon.

"Truth is a good thing to have on tap," he said. "But you need to draw it into the jug of tact. Ye'll get kiboshed for——"

Here Guise knocked out his pipe on Tod's head, and Blake came in from the bar to sort out disputants with an unsparing hand.

"Who's looking for trouble?" he demanded, jerking Roddy out of the ruck with the decision of long practice. There was red pipe-ash inside Roddy's collar; but his fear of authority was hotter.

"I never did—I didn't mean to make a row——"

"'Tain't necessary to unload excuses on the market till we tell you we're asking for unadulterated lies," said Blake. "You get away home, Roddy——"

"You let Roddy alone," struck in Lou, "unless you want to chuck me too, Blake. Roddy's my guest——"

"Which is why Randal ain't bin down these ten nights," explained Ike. "Why ain't yer on night-shift, Roddy?"

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"Fluming's broke in Paddy's Gully," said the Packer. "Yer could hear Ormond swearin' from here till day before yest'd'y if yer stood out in the wind. 'Sides, it's Guise's blame—an' 'Tod's."

"Bedad, if it's foight ye're spilin' for, come here," cried Tod. "I'll be afther aitin' ye up wan be wan, an' niver knowin' it."

"Go an' hit somethin' yer own size, little man. Where's Danny?"

"Where should he be but tellin' Suse 'bout his ballotin'? He's in for land what they say'll carry three sheep to the acre, an' p'raps a calf——"

"Sure then, he's a sheep-farmer a'ready," crowed Tod. "Caught a tick on to himself yesterday an' sint clane away for his wool-sacks. Nothin' loike takin' toime be the tail—an' hangin' on—if ye want to git there."

The amble of hoofs came down the street, and Rogers spoke with the certainty of observation.

"That's Pipi Wepeha's old hoss. Bring him along in, Blake. He's a three-act comic hopra when he gits goin'."

The Packer blinked over to Murray.

"He's come along ter thank yer fur givin' his son free lodgin', Murray," he wheezed.

Murray yawned, his head against the chimney-piece.

"Let him," he said wearily. His shield was

down for the time, and he did not care who knew it. For there was nothing more shameful than body-ache behind. But this was the last day that Murray laid aside his armour before man.

"He's thursty be the sound of corks," said Tod. "Lou—ye're all koinds of a villain."

The accordeon crept slowly, mysteriously into one of the old, old Maori chants that few Europeans dare meddle with. Above it Lou was singing softly in the liquid Maori tongue. To the pakeha who did not understand, the tune carried a quiver and throb that hurried the blood in the veins. To him who knew, it was a call to strip the clothes of civilisation off his senses. And this call comes more often than the world guesses. Ted Douglas frowned.

"You're going to give Murray a tough bone to chew, Lou," he said.

"Well, it's a free show. You can watch him chew it," said Lou, cheerfully.

Ike shivered, and Mogger noticed the tension of his body with a puzzled contempt. To three Colonials in ten the great Things that God has made, and that man cannot conquer, send their souls awash with secret gropings and beliefs in more than can be lathered into shape by the tongue. The remainder take their schooling because the State orders it, and their wetting on the wild ranges because Nature orders it, and gain just so much knowl-



edge from both Teachers as enables them to be treated with parallel indifference. This nails the understanding flat on the bed-rock of fact; and, although a new country can desire no better foundation, it is the touch of mystery and the forward-flung desire to make out to the unknown—to the Back of Beyond, that will shape the battlements and the cornices in a new free strength that has no copy.

“Begorra,” cried Tod, promptly, “if he’s clane an’ clever enough to shmack that smoile of yersilf’s into another shape, me boyo, I’ll take him out, an’ trate him till he’ll niver be foindin’ his way to the saddle at all, at all.”

Someone sniggered approval; then the door swung wide, and Pipi Wepeha came through.

To Murray all Maoris were a beastly nuisance, and Pipi was a dirty one as well. But he cut his nails and his hair thrice yearly, and his slop-made clothes were knotted together with flax. He squatted by the fire with soft words and coarse cunning jokes; and Lou, playing tenderly, guessed well what was to come of it all.

Pipi’s speech held the halt of a tongue learnt over-late, and he helped it forward with the dumb vivid talk of brown lean arms and fingers. Wild stories he told; and Lou gave the keynotes unerringly; and the crowd round the fire fell silent, drew closer, flinched, or shut up

their hands as the red fire of sin and courage and lust and mystery flicked round them to Pipi's swift words. When the brain is overwrought, the body is more fitted to touch that universe of meaning which lies behind speech and movement. A man bears this learning alone and unshowing, as Murray bore it now in his corner, with one booted leg crossed on his knee, and a numb dread sliding down on the thickening shadows and the tightening silence of the men.

Above the accordeon Lou's face alone was bright in the flame-light. It was beautiful and wicked as the stories that Pipi told. Stories of centuries on centuries of uncleansed lives with their desire and their strength and their elusive horror which slips between words as sand between the fingers. Pipi's white hair twitched on his scalp. He leaned where the light on the shrunken skin struck the tattoo-spirals to the likeness of fibres from whence the leaf-greenness has rotted. His eyes were as the yolk of a stale egg—blotched, blood-flecked, and smurred, and his speech plaited coarse white-man talk with the delicate imagery of the Maori.

They were things new to Murray that he told. Things that no Englishman has yet learnt—nor will learn while English soil gives him birth. For they are the breath of New Zealand. They come in the glad winds, and

the long sweep of tussock over billowed downs, and the awful purity of the snow-ranges, and the evil derision of the keas, and the gay recklessness of the galloping winds. All this is in the blood of a Colonial. But an outsider cannot tabulate it when he comes to the handling of the man.

The fire fell, and out along the street noises lessened and died. And yet Pipi held the men while the stillness ran prickly on each spine, and stared, horror-wide, in Roddy's eyes. Lou laughed, drawing a great double-chord from the keys.

"You're an immoral old devil, Pipi," he said. "And Roddy will have a fit very shortly if you feed him any more of that stuff."

"He aha——" began Pipi, clutching a dirty claw on Roddy's collar.

Murray slung the boy aside.

"Don't you play up with him, you old heathen," he said. "The kid has never done you any harm. I'm your meat if you want to sharpen your teeth."

The easy defiance of the man showed in the back-swing of his shoulders, and the smile on his lips. But every nerve in him was awake.

Pipi's hands went out in quick gesture. Then he turned.

"For you—apopo," he said. "E noho ra."

"Haere ra," said Murray cheerfully, and went up the passage, drawn by the click of bil-

liard balls where Danny was fighting the marker on level ground.

In the dark by the door when the men had passed Pipi caught Roddy's sleeve.

"You know te room—te place where Murray sleep?" he demanded, underbreath.

"Ye-es," said Roddy.

"Ah! Kapai. You go then. Kia tupato koe. Bring me Murray's sock—his handkerchief—his necktie. Haere. Bring one thing. Anything. Go, then."

The ground was heaving under Roddy's feet, and he knew that his voice was uncertain. So did the tohungas of old take a half-worn thing from the man whom they meant to destroy.

"I can't," he said, his words bobbing in his throat.

Pipi whipped a handkerchief from the boy's side-pocket.

"No? Kore rawa? Then I have—this."

"I will go," said Roddy, and ran upstairs, and snatched a red necktie from the hook by Murray's looking-glass. The sweat was cold on his face when he received his handkerchief again and went out alone into the night.

Fysh reported next day that Roddy had come into camp with eyes blank as a tea-cup, and a tongue that could not join two words straightly. He further remarked that if Roddy was going to get the horrors from seeing

other men drink—his own breath being sweet as a baby's—the matter would be delivered into Ormond's hands very promptly.

"Ask Murray if Roddy is the only fellow likely to get the horrors without drink," suggested Lou; but he gave no explanation whatever when Fysh demanded it.

It was in the next week that Murray determined to go up to the All Alone and call on Jimmie—quite privately and artlessly—to elicit information. He had drawn blank on forty-two counts already, and only the last extremity would have made him insult Ted Douglas by questions where he mustered with his fellows out back on the ranges.

Night caught Murray in the flax-gully where the first blink of Jimmie's light showed on the spur, and he stumbled up through scratching matakuri and Wild Irishman, jerked the door-latch, and cast his swag on the mud floor.

"I'm wanting a feed and a shakedown, Jimmie," he said, "for I can't make Lachlan's camp to-night."

Jimmie was squatted by the fire with his little pinched face solemn. But he kicked the sticks together in haste, slung the billy, swept packages of rabbit-skins out of the half-cask chair, and set Murray in it. And there was no hint of fear in his welcome.

"Took in over this job, I was," he said, sway-

ing on his heels, and thumping more crackling skins into a square. "Rafferty contracted from Robertson fur the season, an' I tuk the tail-end over from Raff. He telled me there was good pickin's in it."

"And aren't there?" Murray was watching him keenly.

"Aren't there?" Jimmie spat on the grey fur contemptuously. "No, there ain't! An' me sweatin' wi' trappin' an' shootin' an' phosphorus—mixin' me own bloomin' stuff, too. Look at me hands."

Murray looked at the deep burns that the frost had turned to living sores, and he looked at the narrow peaked face above. Then he glanced round the little whare. For the place where a man lives tells his character, let his face and speech lie as they will.

There were holes in the sod walls through which past legions of rabbiters had let the moon poke her fingers, uncaring. Jimmie had stuffed each crack with tussock, and cut a wedge for the cranky door. The hut was desolate, dirty and empty. There were sacks in the bunk with the blankets, and no reading anywhere save a newspaper that had been used to wrap fat. All these things were explained by the darkness back of Jimmie's eyes, and the restlessness of his fingers.

Murray was tender as a woman, for all the stern life that held him. But he balanced the

two finely; and just now, against knowledge of the loneliness that eats to the core of a man, stood the belief that the death and starvation of the old proud-hearted Buggy was Jimmie's sin alone.

"What's troubling you, Jimmie?" he demanded suddenly.

Jimmie hesitated. Then he kicked out the wedge, and the door fell open to the night.

"Wouldn't them blanky ole mountings trouble Ole Nick hisself?" he said.

It was not a world for a man to handle. It was alive with its own strong desolation and its unbroken pride. Peak on glistening peak of everlasting snow; black rugged ridges; slopes pallid with the rain-death that had stripped the earth from them, and reefs of sullen cloud smudging the cold stars. The snarl of the river fighting through its boulders came over the shingle that sloped from the door, and a couple of Paradise duck showed for an instant against the grey breadth of it as they fled down to the lower country for nesting.

"I'd sooner hear silence than that river," said Murray, and shivered. "It's ghastly to think you're the first living man who's heard its waters go by. I don't like being so near the beginning of things myself."

"You're generally nearer the end," said Jimmie, tartly. Then his voice changed. "It's runnin' past the township thirty-odd mile

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down, yer know. An' it's bin makin' me dream o' nights. There—there ain't any bad news down ter the township, o' course?"

The keenness of the tracker ran into Murray's eyes. He shaded them, watching the little man folding the rabbit-skins.

"Bad news? Let's see. The Corin girl has hooked Pat Armstrong from the Glory, and the keas are rough on the Mains ewes all along the river downs. Scannell has squads out shooting every night, and Ted Douglas is nearly off his head——"

Jimmie spilt the tea that he was shaking into the sputtering billy.

"Let him go off his head," he said. "I 'ope he will, an' die of it. He got me the chuck-out from Mains. He as allers called hisself my mate."

"There are folk who say that he'll get himself the chuck-out before long." Murray's every nerve was set to observe the man opposite. "Old Buggy is dead. Died alone of starvation. He sent away the woman who looked after him because he couldn't pay her wages, and he starved, the proud old fool, because he wouldn't ask for help. He kept all his money in the house, and—some—men—say that Ted Douglas took it."

Jimmie thumped a skin very flat, and he did not look up. At last he said:

"Ain't they 'cusing me too?"



For the first time in memory Murray's brain was knocked flat.

"Yes," he said, weakly.

"An' that's what yer here fur? Roped in Ted yet?"

"No."

"Well, Ted done it. You put Ted and me face ter face an' I'll tell you how. I'm through wi' my contrac' next week, an' I'll be along then, if that's soon enough. Are it?"

"How am I to know that you won't run?" said Murray, lightly.

Jimmie stood upright, and his uneven breaths shook the loose shirt.

"Ted Douglas put shame on me 'fore all the fellers," he said. "D'yer think as I'll ever fur-give him fur that? I'd kill him ef I was big enough. D'yer think I'd lose this chanst? Murray, I'd walk my feet raw but I'd git the nick on him ef I had ter go down ter the township barefoot."

Murray got up and flung the door open.

"I call for you this day week," he said. "Ted Douglas will be down from the mustering then. And now, I am going on to Lachlan's. There's not room in this place for you and me."

## CHAPTER IX

IN the deep gully six miles from the homestead Randal and Moggers were stumping. It was three years since Randal had helped there at the felling of slim birch and great totara and matai, and afterwards put a firestick through the raffle of broken tree-ferns and earth-laid branches. A few dead writhed spars lay over the gully-sides yet, although the most had been drawn for the fencing; and all along the bottom, stumps raised their venomous heads in derision for the men who wrought with them.

Mogger had worked on a dredge once. He came out of the six-foot hole round a birch-root and made comparisons.

“ . . . which it carried the old complicated 'and machinery, too. But it was a fool ter this bloomin' kind o' organ'sm. An' sech a waste of a hole, when as the brute is out,” he added, spitting into it thoughtfully. “Cud bury lots o' folk in there. Yer cud so.”

“Two grandads and a granny?” suggested Randal, changing his hands on the axe-shaft, and descending with a slide into the pit again.

"An' a step-mother," agreed Mogger, tucking the tatters of his shirt inside his waist-belt; "an' here's Buck wi' the tackle at last. Think she's loose enough, Randal?"

"There's one yet—look out!"

Mogger stood back while the chips flew, whirring out of the depths with a nasty hum. Randal was stripped to singlet and gungarees, and the muscles ran on his hairy arms and bared chest. The dust of the earth was thick on him before his time, and the sweat dripped down his lean face. Above the bark of the blade his breaths sounded distinct as the throb from an engine-room, and Mogger guessed in some dim way that the whole strength of the man was meeting something beyond the singing creaking root. But because, to his belief, Randal had no relatives the wide world through, his guesswork could carry him no further.

The last root snapped with an upward curl. Randal climbed out of the open grave and lay flat whilst his breath came back. And the roar of quick blood through his ears and his heart beat out one tune as it had beat it these three days past: "Effie and Kiliat. Effie and Kiliat."

All the station was saying it. All the station looked at Randal to hear what he was saying. And Randal kept shut lips, and believed and disbelieved and believed again, and could

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get no speech with her day by day, nor any answer to his letter, posted, as of old, in the dead laurel beside her window.

Down the gully-side, among the white naked bones of dead bush Buck was coming with his team and his cheerful unmusical song. The sky was ruled hard along the gully-top; green-black, with angry red to westward, and Randal came to his feet in weary haste.

"Pass along the hauling-tackle, Mogger. Back 'em, Buck. Back 'em, you idiot. We're going to get a storm out of this directly——" Then he swore as a cast chain flicked skin from his ear in its spinning, caught the hook at end of it, and forced it into the horse-shoe driven deep into the stump. Mogger wrestled on the far side shouting directions as Buck brought his team up to the collar.

"Get the bar," said Randal, sliding the jack under the root in the only possible place, and Mogger took up position with the unerring exactness of one who has done the same thing many, many times.

With soft voice and hands Buck drew from the horses each last inch they could give. But always, not being built on ratchet lines, the purchase broke under struggle of straining hoofs, and the stump jammed on the nose of the jack, flaying Randal's hands until he cast the thing aside in disgust.

"Where are those extra pulleys?" he demanded. "And I want the reins."

He squeezed the thick rope through the sheave, took the side-strain with a rooted matai and two pulleys added, and began the game anew with the fall-rope shrieking above the tense hum of quivering chains. The stump rocked and groaned, moved an inch, settled back. Mogger beat out a place for his bar and stood on the end of it for leverage. He escaped a broken neck by methods best known to himself when he came up headlong from the pit to grasp Buck about the middle and bring him to earth. Randal was tired to his heart, and the argument that scattered in sputtering laughter did not interest him. He sat on the jack, staring down the grey length of the gully where a thousand little fires from the root-piles built through the weeks fluttered and winked wicked eyes. They were telling Randal that there were a thousand more fires to make before his work was done, and that, until that day, there would be no peace for him. Because it is required of every man that he bring his duties full tale to the Judgment Seat.

Then Art Scannell came break-neck down the gully, sitting loose and graceful as the black mare took the burning raffle with little sideway jumps and flirtings and great full-extended leaps. Beside the team Art wrenched her back on her haunches, and the very

poise of his head hurt Randal in its dear familiarity.

“That the stump you started last week, Randal? Don’t wonder my father’s complaining about the work here if this is the way you go at it! Pick up that jack and shove it in, Buck; get those brutes going and look sharp. Get them going, I tell you.”

Randal’s bleeding hands shut on the grip of the jack. Mogger handled the bar in a new carefulness. Up in the closing night sounded the chain-clank, and the thunder of beating hoofs, and of labouring breaths. And just so easily might three horses have pulled the earth out of position in the sky. Art Scannell came down from his mare.

“What are you doing with all that foolery? Get a straight pull, I tell——”

Randal climbed up to explain the value of the side-pull.

“It gives you a sixty-horse power ’stead of three——”

Art Scannell turned on his heel. Somewhere in his sodden brain he connected Randal with that week of horror in the whare by Lonely Hill, and he did not love him therefor.

“Take that rigging off—now, make ’em pull. Make them pull, will you? Here; let me get at them——”

He came with a stirrup-iron, and Buck blocked him desperately.

"Don't! Don't go ter touch 'em. I'll git every sweatin' drop o' pull outer them—I kin do it. Oh, darn ye! if they won't do it fur me, d'yer think as you kin——"

At the thud of the iron on her flank the off-sider sprang, and staggered back, half-choked by the collar. Randal held Buck by the grip on his shoulder.

"You'll get fired if you hammer your boss," he said contemptuously. "Let him kill the brutes if he's fool enough. They're his own."

"They're mine," sobbed Buck. "Mine! Aren't I looked arter them—oh!"

It was the cry of a mother for her first-born. But the writhing shoulder was still under Randal's hands.

"Don't look then. Oh, by Jingo, he'll muck things directly. Mogger——"

Mogger's great body was stiff with a new sternness. He was weighing the chances of providing for his relatives on any new billet that might fall to him after he had slain Art Scannell with the fist. He glanced at Randal. Randal's dark face was unmoving, and his eyes told nothing at all.

"He cud do it," said Mogger in his throat. "He ain't got a fambly same as I got. He cud do it. But he ain't got the feelings o' a dead black-beetle, Randal ain't."

Some passion unknown to the other held Art. He beat the team from end to end and

back again. The stump rocked forward in obedience to the maddened force, and rocked back, smashing the lever and Buck's foot, and bringing the black colt over in the chains with the other two atop. Buck twisted free with a cry thin with pain, and mixed himself up in the tackle and the great heaving bodies and the flurry of beating hoofs.

"Come out of that," shouted Art. "Come out, you ——! I'll get the brutes up."

"I never," yelled Buck in defiance. "You leave me 'lone. G-get out."

His white desperate face showed an instant in the raw flame of a little fire near by. Then a straining head with wild eyes blocked it out. Mogger hesitated. He had all the courage of an ordinary man; but none could tell what might be in the half-seen hell of iron hoofs and chains if Art Scannell struck again. And Art Scannell did strike.

Mogger saw Randal's long-armed swoop into the ruck. He saw him again in the fire-light with a face unknown, and Buck carried by the nape exactly as a man holds a rabbit. Then he saw Art Scannell go down before a straight cut between the eyebrows, and heard Randal's voice, sharp-edged.

"Get round and uncouple the off-sider if you can. I'll see to the others."

Swiftly, cunningly, Randal cast off hooks, and gentled and raised the struggling bulks.



Buck wept over the bleeding flanks, and forgot that his own foot swung helpless. Randal bound it with all the rags at command, and knotted the bandage with flax-strips. But his hands and his heart were numbed by more than the chill of the night, and the crash of his knuckles on the young smooth forehead was loud yet in his ears.

"Best wallop some water over that chap, I reckon," remarked Mogger, making investigation, and he brought a capful from the first spring.

Art Scannell had been half-killed too often to submit to unconsciousness long. At the third repeat he sat up, came to his feet, and said just one sentence:

"You'll come up to the house for your cheque to-night, Randal."

Randal said nothing. He was wondering what comes after the end of all things, and he walked out into the dark of the gully as a man walks in an unknown land.

"Does he mean it?" cried Mogger, as the black mare tore past him with Art Scannell kicking for the stirrups. "Does he mean ter sack yer true, Randal? Why didn't yer kill him, then, an' hev done with it?"

Randal's boots brushed the little flames battenning on the dug-out stumps, and each red eye brought back memory of that which he would not see any more. The boys marvelled that

Randal took always the end bunk in the whare, no matter how many lay to his choice. For the end bunk headed to the sou'west and the fierce sleet and rain that sifted through un-found cracks and thundered on the wall. And Randal did not tell that through one crack whereof he alone knew showed a faint fleck of light beyond the pine avenue which had its beginning in Effie Scannell's window. On that light he had fed love and desire and hope for a year past. But he would not do it any more.

At the gully-top he turned and looked back. A cold wind soughed restlessly in the dead branches and the flax, striking the flames to passing gleams, and spinning little whirls of smoke to the empty sky. Pale afterglow held up the dark to show the gathering clouds rushing down wind, and Randal dropped his head, tramping on unspeaking.

Buck, perched on the black colt, talked in undertone to his team, and Mogger whistled fitfully until the fury of pelting rain caught them in the length of the sullen miles. Randal turned up his collar and cared not though the clay underfoot squelched to mud and to running water; but Mogger spoke unkindly to the black thing that rose up at the wool-shed gate.

"Git out of the tide-way, yer lumpin' gal-loot! Think we come home ter stan' here an' watch you?"

"Boss was jes' sendin' out a search party," said Moody, creaking the gates back on the hinges. "Young Art's bin lettin' some queer kind o' yarns fly——"

"Shouldn't wonder. Did he come in, then?"

"Did he come in? Did he come like a bloom-in' torn Ida wi' no frills lef' ter him? Yes; he's comed in. An' what guv him the emu's egg fresh laid atween his eyes?"

"Randal," said Buck, stooping his head as the colt passed to its stall. Moody whistled in three-tiered admiration.

"Must 'a' put some body-weight inter that," he remarked. Then the flash of the lantern across the faces gave him sudden wisdom. "Don't git tellin' the boss too much about it, Randal, fur yer like ter be tellin' him wi' the aidge o' yer fist too, be the look o' yer."

Randal's feet crunched the gravel on the house-track, and Mogger's voice rang after him:

"Randal—shall I come along an' lend a hand?"

"No, thanks," said Randal, speaking for the first time. And the dark dripping shadows of the pines took him.

Though a strong man must draw on himself only; now and again, slicing away the Present with the knife of the Years Between, comes the sharp over-mastering longing to take his trouble with child-hands back to his

mother's knee, and to leave it there. Randal was weaker than he knew when the blink from the office-window called him over the verandah to the door. Art flung it open at his knock, and Randal noticed, with a workman's merciless pride, that both eyes were swelling under the bandage.

Scannell looked up from his desk, and Randal straightened, meeting the look defiantly. But neither man spoke. From the chair where he lay with both legs flung over the arm, Art Scannell was laughing.

"Go on, pater. Pitch it straight—then I will——"

"Hold your tongue," said Scannell, unmoving, and his eyes ran, keen-searching, over the length of the man before him.

Randal's coat and shirt were open in the cold night, and rain had beat the dust of them to mud. His dark hair was rough on the tanned forehead, and sweat and earth grimed each hard line that coarse living and soul-suffering had scored on the flesh. But, apart from the knotted hands drawn with corns, apart from the shoulder-stoop of the yoke-bound, and the restless-eyed sullenness that will take neither pity nor help, was the race-mark that no man may lose. Scannell felt for it, saying:

"You are not a liar, I think, Randal?"

"I never heard a man call me so," said Randal, suggestively, and his hands shut up.

"Then," said Scannell slowly, "I ask you—what is my daughter to you?"

All the blood in Randal's body was leaping in his throat. That was surely why his head felt so very cold, and why his hand was numb and dead on the unseen thing that he was gripping. Somewhere Art Scannell was laughing; and, without doubt, it was the laugh of a demon sent straight from the Pit.

"You've taken him on the hop, pater, and he hasn't got his lies ready. Let me wake him up. See here, you Randal; half the station's betting it's Kiliat, and the other half's betting it's you. The odds are on Kiliat down on the township, and I'm sweet on him myself. But if Effie's sweet on you——"

Scannell's voice broke the laugh, and Randal raised his head to meet it.

"Will you answer me? What is my daughter—my daughter—to you?"

It did not need the emphasis that cut like a whip-lash over the face.

"She is more to me than I will tell you," said Randal, deliberately. "And I am to her—just as any other station-hand might be."

"That's a lie, anyway," cried Art, beating his pipe-bowl on his knee. "Effie is a little fool, and she's all school-girly sentiment yet. And you've taken advantage of it. Look at him, pater. Ask him if he ever kissed her!"

"Arthur——" Then Scannell's eye caught

Randal's, and he stood up; and the silence between the two men was tense and dangerous as a drawn wire-rope.

"Well?" said Scannell at last.

Randal would not lie for himself.

"I have kissed her—against her will."

"By Jove, but we'll have to have her in to settle that," cried Art, springing up.

Randal's back was to the shut door, and his drawn face flamed.

"Haven't you insulted your sister enough already, you young brute?" he said.

Scannell looked on the two, and the man in him felt sudden strong pity for the other man.

"Go back to your seat, Arthur," he said.

"You at least do not know what is due to your sister. Randal, you leave Mains to-night, and the district to-morrow. I think I can expect so much of you. You were a gentleman once."

"Once," said Randal, and laughed. "That's a thing a man can't get back, you know."

"It depends on the man. You can prove the contrary now."

Randal knew his limitations. He had beaten them out through too many nights and days.

"I can't," he said.

"That means——?"

"It means that I will not leave the district," said Randal.

Scannell sat down and wrote a cheque with hands that shook. He ripped out the leaf, and

tossed it across the table. "If I see you on Mains again I'll set the dogs on you," he said. "You may go."

Art pushed back the bandage as Randal passed to the outer door.

"Think I've got good interest for this, Randal," he cried. "Randal—you've forgotten your cheque."

But only a spatter of wet wind and torn leaves licked over the verandah in answer.

"And that's done with," said Art Scannell then. "Ship Effie down to town for a month or two, pater, and give her plenty of rope, and I'll guarantee Randal will find his hash settled for keeps."

"You will hold your tongue about this matter, Arthur," said Scannell, looking straightly at his son.

Art paused with his hand on the door-knob.

"My dear pater," he said cheerfully, "don't you fret. I know a thing or two."

## CHAPTER X

“SHE wants me to give it up,” said Maiden.

In a little back bedroom at Blake’s, Suse had been whispering to the other girl of Danny, and showing, half-shyly, the trousseau made with such anxious labour. She smoothed a white frill with rough fingers, speaking absently.

“Why, dear?”

“Well—she says—do you think the bonnet’s so awful unbecoming, Suse?”

Suse shut a little smile into the drawer with the white frill.

“Trust a mother ter find out jest where ter tackle a gel,” she murmured. Then she looked over at Maiden’s face closed in the curve of her hands as a flower is closed in its sheath.

“Didn’t nobuddy ever tell yer as more than the Lassie bonnet weren’t becoming ter yer, Maiden?”

“Only Steve Derral—an’ he don’t count.”

“Don’t he? Since when?”

“Since always,” said Maiden, untruthfully.

“I ain’t seen him this month past. He’s up musterin’ somewheres out back, Danny says.”



“Oh!”

“I ain’t seed him since he an’ Lou had that turn-up what near laid ’em both out. It was a awful fight, Danny said!” Suse came to Maiden’s side; her hands on her broad hips, her plain kindly face something envious. “Chaps say as they fought about you, Maiden,” she said.

Maiden’s head went up, and the scarlet flamed to her ear-tips.

“What give him the right to fight ’bout me, I’d like ter know!”

“Which is he?”

Maiden wheeled to the window, confused. Then the red ran to her forehead, and Suse behind her grunted in sudden disapproving. For Lou passed on his way to the ranges where the mustering had cut half the Mains boys from their kind for a full fortnight. He pulled under the window with a quick swerve.

“Good-bye for five days, Maiden,” he called; then swayed to the mare’s impatient bound, and tore up the street, leaving the swift flash of laughing eyes and bared fair head, and a sudden silence to the two in the room.

“I’d sooner hev Steve than Lou Birot,” said Suse, with meaning.

“You don’t want either, do you? You’ve got Danny.”

Suse bit her lip. Then she tried again.

"I'd sooner plough my furror wi' Steve's steady old team than wi' the other."

"I'm not wantin' ter plough any furrows," said Maiden, indifferently.

Suse looked on womanhood as she saw it in the hard patient, loving lives about her.

"Reckon as we've all got some furrors, dear. But you kin take yer chance whether yer'll have a man as'll plough it along the ground wi' yer fur yer bread an' meat, or one as'll——"

"What?"

"One as'll plough it there, Maiden."

The rough finger just touched the smooth girl-forehead, and Maiden straightened, flushing.

"Danny can't plough a furrow anywhere. I saw him turning down the hem of a paddock the other day, and he made an awful mess of it. He said so himself. Is that Randal goin' down the street?"

"Yes. Come in an hour ago lookin' like he'd bin shelterin' from the wet under a wire-fence. Father says he's bin shot out o' Mains."

"He's got the bullet lef' in somewheres," said Maiden, in pity. "They do say as he cares fur Miss Effie, Suse."

"I know. But he won't find her up at the Lion—if that's where he's goin'."

Randal was going to the Lion. He heard the high snarl of the jet before he breasted

the hill, and he heard the clang of Ormond's hammer. For Ormond was making ripples for the boxes: By his foot the steady snore of the hose drove the Pelton wheel, and the blast of the forge made heat-quivers in the air. He had all a strong man's content in work dear to him, and he wrought the red iron with the undistressed power of one who has played no games with constitution or with conscience. The grate of a foot on the shingle caught his ear. Then he dropped the hammer and came forward, rubbing his forearm across his wet forehead.

Randal put aside the frank welcome curtly.

"I've come to ask you more than you'll like to give. Miss Scannell is often up here, isn't she? Do you know when she is coming again?"

Ormond stopped the hose, and the Pelton wheel dribbled to silence. He looked at Randal, remembering Father Denis' words: "If ever Randal comes to you for help, give it. He will not be coming to many."

"Miss Scannell and Kiliat are riding up here this afternoon," he said.

"I want to see her—alone," said Randal. "I want you to arrange for me to see her alone, to-day."

Ormond pushed back his cap and his voice was suddenly stern.

"You must tell me more than that. Why

the devil should I arrange anything of that sort?"

"Because—I will see her—somewhere and somehow. I will see her alone. Scannell has sacked me from Mains; but I'll go back—by night if they kick me out by day—if you won't give me the chance here. You had better give me the chance, Ormond, or—I may do more harm than I have done already."

The steady grey eyes flashed on Randal's face; then dropped. It is not right that one man should look on another man's heart when desperate pain has stripped it naked. Ormond kicked out a broken bolt lying in the dried wash; kicked it again, and it dropped the fifty feet into the creek-bed where a dottrell was piping across the sand-pit to her frightened youngsters.

"Does Miss Scannell wish to see you?" he asked at length.

"I don't know."

"Then you want me to do this against Scannell's express desire, and possibly against hers too?"

"Yes."

"You are asking a great deal."

"Yes."

Ormond hesitated. He acknowledged the pride that cut all explanations; and, very certainly, pity hurt him for the man who could

never speak with such as Effie Scannell before other men.

"Poor devil!" he said in his throat. Then he put his finger on the one pulse which he could trust to beat true in Randal.

"Can you shake on it? That's all right, then. You won't go back on that, Randal. I'll manage it somehow."

"Thanks," said Randal only.

He turned and tramped over the little dip to the Packer's claim. From the tussock top of it he could see the first wind in the bridle-track beyond the dredges. The Packer, wading up to his middle in wash, was gay as a boy with a holiday nearing.

"Murray's away beyond the All Alone after Jule Harrison," he said, climbing into the tip-head; "so I'm goin' ter take ter-morrer an' all the rest I kin get before he comes back. Onst in five months! Time was when I cud stan' it ev'ry Sat'day. But it ain't a gift wi' me like it was wi' Jos Greer. A good drunk every five months is all as I kin manage now—an' that with Blake's stuff, too. Phelan's would burn the copper-bottom outer a dredge-biler in twict."

He crawled in under the fall, and Randal sat in the manuka, breaking the white petals away from the brown hearts, and staring down into the next gully where Roddy Duncan and Fysh were having a washing-day. Every

nerve in him listened for the far clack of hoofs that would mean Effie Scannell and Kiliat riding up the Lion.

"Fellers say why don't I work more'n three days a week," said the Packer, coming into daylight again with the water shining on his tattered oilskins. "I says what's the sense o' it when I can't hev a drunk more'n onst in five months? What'd I want wi' the money? What do any single man want wi' money 'cept ter git drunk on it?"

Randal looked down on the lean old man bent double in the narrow race.

"By Jove," he said, "I believe you're right, Packer."

Then he sprang up, and went back to Ormond hastily. For, far down on the level of the Creek, two horses swerved into the bridle-track as one.

It was a quarter-hour later when Effie Scannell came to Ormond's little hut behind the power-house; pushing the door wide, and groping in the gloom for photographs that Ormond had left on the table. Randal spoke across it gently, that he might not frighten her; and the blood left his heart to see the light flash on her face.

"Guy—dearest! Oh, I haven't seen you for so long! Guy—what——?"

Randal kept the table between them.

"I came here to beg your pardon. But I

think I won't. You would never understand that you couldn't give it, Effie."

"Why couldn't I? Guy, you always call me a child; but—but perhaps I could understand, dear. What have you done, Guy?"

"Oh, a very little thing," said Randal, roughly. "I have made you the common talk of the district, Effie. That is all. You—my little white flower! Do you know what men will say of me and of you, Effie, because we love each other?"

"No," she said, with wide eyes.

"No. Of course not." His voice broke. "But I know, dear. I came here with a bad name, Effie, and I never troubled to deny it. Well—there was some truth in it. But since I have known you—Effie, Effie, if you loved me as I love you, you could make of me what you liked. I'd take you away——"

She shrank from the passion of face and voice, and he saw it:

"Forgive me, dear. I'm sorry. But it is all ended now, Effie. Your father has sacked me. He knows."

"Guy! Guy! You're not going away?"

"I can't," said Randal, speaking with difficulty.

"Then it isn't ended! It need never be ended. There are still the hills and the dear old lonely gullies for us. Guy——"

Randal did not come near. He was holding the bond given to Ormond.

"It is ended, I think. People speak of Kiliat, Effie. Will you tell me if there is any truth in what they say?"

Effie spread her little bare hands on Ormond's old table-cloth with the tobacco-burns in it.

"When you see a ring there it will be time enough to ask me of Mr. Kiliat," she said, with a quaint dignity. "Your letter made me very angry, Guy. I have never doubted you."

Randal looked at her steadily—at the white fur round throat and wrists; at the delicate flushed face with the wide sweet eyes; at the dainty figure and hands. His skin burnt suddenly.

"The cases are hardly parallel," he said, dryly.

"Oh, Guy, Guy! I wish I could understand you! You say you love me, and when we're together you don't seem to like it a little bit, you dear old silly boy! I never bother about the future a scrap, Guy. It mightn't ever come, you know. And when we're together it's just the now, dear——"

"Effie—don't——"

The thrown-back face was laughing between the out-held curved arms.

"Guy, dear Guy—it's just the now that matters, isn't it?"



And then Randal forgot the pledge that he had given to Ormond with his hand-grip.

It was dusk when Ormond came into the hut. Randal lay on the bunk with his face on his arms; but the tension of his body showed no rest. He rose as Ormond struck a light.

"Thanks," he said, vaguely. "I've made myself pretty much at home, haven't I? Good-night."

Ormond's hand was on the latch first.

"Where are you going?"

"Down to the township—to get drunk, I think. Phelan's is the best place, if you'd like to know. Kerosene and painkiller. But it knocks the senses out of you quicker than anything else."

"You'll have tea with me first," said Ormond, unmoving.

"No—let me go, Ormond."

"I am not going to ask questions. But you are safer here than in Phelan's bar to-night, Randal."

"I have broken my word to you," said Randal.

The steady grey eyes met his straightly. Then Ormond came over with his hand out.

"I had no business to ask it, I think. Will you shake again, Randal? And now we'll have some tea."

## CHAPTER XI

MAINS was mustering for shearing, and only the man who has tramped a month through on a hundred-thousand-acre hill-run begins to understand what that means. And his explanations, though entirely vivid, are not always clear to the lay mind. It was Ted Douglas alone who knew absolutely the value of the work done and to do, and who drove the boys through the days on a straight bit, with a special wire-whip for the man who balked.

Through cold days and hot muggy days, and days of sudden tempers of sleet on the bare tops, and days of close-wrapping fog that made distance very blind and foothold unstable, and that brought clinging wet to soak each man to the chilled skin. And by the long hours that began and ended under the stars that stern mother that bred them tested and tortured and tempted them, and the slow brown mobs drew in to the low country and the gaping yards on the homestead block.

Moody said openly that Ted Douglas was a devil this muster. For he had no mercy where country was bad and sheep were slug-

gish and a hot wind blasted the earth. Scott agreed, with the additional assertion that he was sick of graft and meant to take it easy thereafter. And it was on the following morning that Ted's hand fell heavier yet. This was when the cut tussock, bared to the starlight by the drawn tents, was yet warm with the weight of their bodies, and when the cooking-fire held flame to the chill that goes before dawn. Round the fire the boys gathered, sucking life into their pipes, and Ted Douglas came up with the roster.

"We're takin' the Brothers country to-day," he said, "and out to the head of the Dome. It'll be a brutal long day, an' you chaps'll have to put your backs into it. We got to get back to the station Friday, an' it'll take us all we know to do it."

The shearers were booked for Mains in the week following, and all the draughting was yet to do. The boys knew it. But a sudden tension ran into the group round the fire, and talk and laughter died on their mouths. The Brothers country made the cruellest muster on Mains. It was slippery tussock and running shingle and rotten slag where no sane goat would climb. But the Mains sheep loved it with all their demon souls, and the Mains boys drew many thousands from it; climbing, hour after hour, hand over hand, through places where no dog would follow.

"It's sinful country," said Conlon at length. "Better break it into two days, Ted. We can't do more than we can, you know."

"Bein' that near the sky it orter hev larned better," added Ike. "But it seemin'ly ain't. You'll hev ter give us two days fur the Brothers, Ted."

Ted Douglas' hands were in his pockets, and his quiet eyes sifting round the group.

"We're takin' the Brothers an' the Dome to-day," he said. "Anybody got anythin' more to say?"

A month's hill-mustering will weed weaklings out of any camp under heaven. Indubitably, the boys were toughened, lung, sinew, and muscle, to any strain that might fall. But they were growing stale, and more than one was foot-sore, and the flame of mutiny was just a new-born flicker in the camp.

Three yards off Buck was strapping the last pack, and casting the great saddles athwart the horses with a jangle of chains. Mogger muttered underbreath, and through the smoke of his half-lit pipe Lou Birot was watching Ted Douglas.

"We can't do it in a day," said Scott, sulkily.

"Do you mean that you won't?"

Scott looked round for support. He made no answer.

"Come on," said Ted, kindly. "Don't be

shy. I got time to thump some sense into you 'fore we make a start. What way did they gene'ly get you goin' in the war, Scott? Or was you runnin' down to Capetown all the time?"

Somebody sniggered. Then Steve laughed, and the queer eager look went out of Lou's eyes.

"Arrah! what's the matter wid it, then?" cried Tod, jerking a match up his trouser-leg. "Jabberin' here won't mend the hours for us. An' sure if the day's long we'll git home the sooner. An' where will ye be puttin' me at all, Ted, me boyo?"

Ted Douglas carried the whole map of Mains in his head, and no man need get his sheep into an impassable pocket or be blocked by a ten-foot gut if he laid his course by Ted's words. He struck into the half-defiant silence with the decision of one who understands and handles men in all moods; gave place and position to each, ordered a squad out to load the packs on the saddles, and thereafter swept them over the raupo-rimmed creek with their lunches rammed in their side-pockets, and a half-hundred dogs of sorts at their heels.

Right, left, and straight forward, the rough spurs of the Brothers received them, and baffled them as they set their faces ever to the North and to the long harsh hours that waited. Down on the dead camp Buck took a last hole

in a pack-strap, clambered into his saddle, and chirruped an order to the unreined pack-horses. They answered with the quick lift of feet to a trot, and passed down the creek-bed, to take, by low and winding ways, the desolate track to the Dome where it sat on the edge of the world with a scarlet wreath of sun-rays over its snow.

It is not every man who dares be alone with Nature. For Nature is God, and man, very often, is of himself and the devil. Lou Birot knew this with the absolute certainty of a man who discovers a thing first-hand; and because he knew it he loathed the great merciless silences, and the dark secret gullies, and the terrible purity of the uplifted snow-mountains that no touch of man could subdue nor smirch.

The smell of heat was in the air before dawn. The burden of it was on the shelterless hills ere ever the fog was torn from the crests. Across the broken miles of shingle-tops it made mirage of cabbage-tree and swaying toi-toi beside still water; and more than one man halted with his stick on the grating shingle to curse it, and to curse the sheep pelting by above him, and to trudge steadily on with lips that cracked when he whistled his dogs.

To the lay understanding a man's conscience is his only goal on the hills. The expert knows that he no more dare burk his fair labour there than in the branding-yards with the full sta-

tion at gaze. But thrice was Lou tempted far up on the naked shoulder of the Brothers. For the sun burnt on the black rotten rocks and the stiff tufts of heather and the savage brown thistle between; and the sparkle of a creek in cool fern, seven miles off as the foot must go, was a torment that dried his tongue in his mouth. His flask was empty long since. But he up-ended it again before putting it away with his untasted lunch. Then he dropped under shelter of a bull-nosed scarp, and lay there.

"And if the sheep get back on me I won't be the only one who mucks things this day," he said.

Below and before him his dogs ranged wide, harrying little mobs that ran together and trickled forward like spilt coffee from a cup. Very far down a trained eye might pick up occasional flickers of life on the heat-run flanges. There lay Conlon's beat where he kept touch with the man below, even as, on terrace and jagged terrace above, Mogger and nine more held the linked chain unbroken until it touched down to the bush-gully on the farther side. The heat turned Lou's bones to water; and all the wonder of heliotrope and violent purple in the gullies, and saffron on the spurs, and flashing diamond where distant waterfalls leapt in fern, were things of emptiness and derision. He lay on his face with his eyes shut, and cared

not for the strenuous life beating above and below.

Over the near vivid crests cutting the skyline, quick black clouds came reefing up. Sunlight struck them to the glistening green of a starling's wing. Into the wide-spaced silence volleyed the sudden roar of musketry; snatching echoes from the splintered rocks; tossed back and out again by the gullies, and live-leaping down the length of the ranges with a broken handful of lightning to chase it. Lou came to his feet with quick hands seeking the rifle-butt, and lust red in his eyes. No man on Mains knew ever that Lou had ridden the Boer war through, there earning praise and secret shame and open disgrace. No man knew that, because each soul must love something or it will die—Lou loved, with all the wild godless heart of him, the ring of the rifle and the gobble of the field-guns growing nearer. He was shouting straight-flung command as in years past, when the next thunder-rattle brought explanation and black disgust. Then a quick snicker of lightning laughed with him.

"Does Ted think he will muster the Brothers to-day?" he said.

Strung across the great head and shoulders of the Brothers the boys saw the storm coming, and each and each, after their own kind, they denounced it, and hesitated, or took action promptly. For there is no man in the Back-



country who does not know what may be when a water-spout bursts on a range-top, and, without any possible doubt, there was water in these black low-bellied clouds. Ted Douglas was on the high shingle faces, where a man carries a stick and places his feet with cunning. Here were a score little flowering heaths to mark danger, for the hillsman knows that they grow only on running shingle. Below, tussock lived on two inches of earth. Below that sprang rocks that sank to tussock and shingle again. But the Mains sheep grew fat on it, and the merciless heat had wearied them; so that they strung along the slim tracks in a slowness that no dog could hasten. One moment Ted stood drawing sharp breath.

"If any of them boys goes back on me Mains'll limp nex' lambin'," he said. Then his up-flung arm sent his dogs forward to nose out stragglers from behind rocking boulders.

A tense hum sounded over the tops, as though someone plucked the strings of a bass-viol. A sudden jolt of thunder came sheer underfoot before the whistle of the lightning was past. Then, deliberate and separate, and so solid that Ted looked to see them roll down hill, followed the rain-drops.

On the hog-backed top beyond all men Tod quailed for an instant and covered his eyes. For the thunder walked the ranges with shaking feet, and each flash of the lightning sang

like a sword-cut on the air. All the great tops were sinking, crumbling under the blackness of cloud; and to the men on the Brothers came a sudden giddiness and horror, as though this sucking sea would draw them under also for Eternity.

"Bedad," said Tod, pulling up his waist-strap, "it's mesilf wud be sooner before the whare foire than aitin' me meat wid this knife an fork. An' what will come of us at all when the rain gits in behint of the shingle?"

There was no man on the Brothers was not thinking of this. There was no man was not hurrying his sheep by sharp command to his dogs, and cast stones, and quick-stumbling feet on the rough under way. The ridges lay across the Brothers like the bones of a cat's tail, and very swiftly the gutters filled with dribbling streams that baulked and held the sheep. The straining dogs hounded them over, and down the slopes, and forward, with the storm roaring on their quarter and the thunder charging through the wild bluffs and gullies as mobs of wild brumbies charge headlong. On the far side one of Steve's worn boots gave from the sole. He had brought two new pairs for this muster; but he was a heavy man, and shingle is more strong than calf-hide. Thereafter he blundered on bare-foot, and watching, with the keen-trained sight that is the property of every musterer, for the weak-hearted falter that

would bring him down through flint and thistles to slay Scott.

The rain pelted to hail that came after the manner of shingle poured from a sack. Ted Douglas stopped one instant; blind, and sick, and with a lump in his throat that meant tears in a woman. Well he knew the men who would flinch before this, and before the certain danger that gathered. Every fibre in him ached for power to take the slack of that unseen chain in his hands, and to wrench it tight, and to sweep it forward by weight of his own savage strength for the good of Mains.

"I must trust 'em. But the Lord only knows if I can trust 'em. Scott'll burk if he thinks the faces are goin' to start; an' there's Raplin, an' Lou—'nless the whole thing takes his fancy; an'—oh, God! Can't I do no more than jest walk?"

But over near twenty miles of high bitter hill-country the boys were running true; and, although they did not know it, the glory of this lay to Ted Douglas' charge.

The hail shut off with the suddenness of a beaten stick dropped from a kerosene tin; and the boys gasped, stood upright, shook the blood from battered faces and hands, and took hold of the mobs again. Round and underfoot thumped the thunder with the earnestness of a steam-hammer in full work, until the throb was cut now and again by the sharp crackle

that made the boys jump, and the outflung anger of lightning. Far over on an unseen face came the roar that was neither thunder nor wind nor the roll of balls down a skittle alley. The top of a big tree sliced the mist for an instant as it pitched forward. Then the mighty groan of the parted slip filled earth, and rang against the sky until it settled to silence far down in a gully-bottom.

"There'll be jes' the naked skull o' that hill grinnin' at us in the mornin'," said Moody, startled to speech. Then he shivered in the soaked rags that clung to him. For it was quite possible that the Brothers might also stand up skull-bare, and grin over the death that lay hid at the bottom.

The shingle tread where four men worked was sloppy as the wash in a dredge-bucket; and the sheep stumbled on it, weighted with water, and crying against the unwearied menace of the dogs. And still the chain dragged forward, pulling all life with it; and still the rain pelted straightly, settling in behind the earth; loosening, loosening; and still the boys counted the ridges yet to be won before the easy slope of the Dome shoulder gave clean foothold of tussock and broom.

It was Tod who heard first from the tops where the wind blew the sound gustily. First the groan as of a calving iceberg; then the quick snarl of shingle, and the following roar

that widened and grew faint and died out in the river below.

"Now sorra a bit of sheep will we be takin' off of that shoulder this great while," he said. "An' it's bad it'll be for anny misfort'nit crathur what we left there. But will we git off out of that befure another will be comin', I wonder?"

Scott heard it, and fear caught him by the nape of the neck. He wheeled, saw the tail-end of it, and began to run. A straight-flung stone fleshed his ear, and he blinked up at Steve, blocked out on the scarp above. Then a greater fear caught Scott. For payment for all things would be required in camp this night, and there would be Ted Douglas to face after. He dropped back sullenly, swarming up the lean ridge before him with the wet wind cutting his eyes and chilled hands.

Among the rotten rock and the flint and mica where the lightning zipped and the rain galloped down in deep channels, Lou was finding purer joy than had been his since the day that broke him in open square before two troops of Irregulars and one Home regiment. For always a brave man loves to stand up to a force that is greater than he. Ted Douglas heard the slip, and a pain beyond body-weariness set in his face. Quite certainly he knew that the sheep must have got back on them, again and yet again, though each man did his

utmost. And who could know until the hour was past whether or no each man had done his utmost?

"I jes' got to trust 'em," he said, over and many times over. "But, by——, I'll kill the man what don't bring in his mob, I will. I will."

The wind plucked their skins with wet sharpened fingers; it spread the gutters into froth, and spun shingle abroad, and flattened the tussocks where straining hands grasped at it. The boys' eyes stung and blinded in the sockets, and the whistle fell dumb on their lips. But the dogs worked by the arm-swing and the jerked stone, and by their own stout-hearted wisdom; and slowly and very heavily, the line drew forward and together, and ran, stream by stream, to the slope of the Dome's western flank.

Night was very near, and the wind blew by in great scuds of rain. Perhaps none but Ted Douglas could have picked each separate lot and the man in charge, and he said little as the sodden mobs tailed in. But Danny, tripping on the first mouthful of speech to his fellows since daybreak, declared:

"Ted's feelin' good down ter the bottom of his spines, he is. An' so is we feelin' good, an' why not? 'Tain't every periodic set o' fellers as cud 'a' mustered on the Brothers ter-day."

"Well, now, an' cock you up," cried Tod,

stumbling, exhausted and lame, through the snow-grass. "It's illigant hayros we are an' all not to be runnin' from the work cut out on us wid our tails down betune our legs—more be chance that Ted wud be afther us wid the big fisht of him, too."

"'Twouldn't hev taken him long ter hev caught me," said Steve, going by with his waistcoat strapped round his bare foot by flax-withes. "Is that Buck wi' the tents over by the whare, or is it the top of the Dome come down for an airin'?"

It was the tents glimmering like moths on the dark, and Buck came from the sod hut at the shout, leaving three billies sputtering on the leaping flames, and a damped turning black in the ashes. With the fear of all things in his mouth he cast himself upon the van, demanding how many were killed in the slip, how many sheep they had brought down, how many hours——

Here Mogger took him by the collar.

"Rouse up all the feed an' drink yer kin fin' while we gits the sheep inter the gully," he said. "An' jes' be rememberin' as we wants fillin' from our toe-nails up ter our back-teeth."

The gully-mouth was stoppered by tied dogs, spent and foot-sore, but unconquered yet. Then the boys stormed the whare; stripping their soaked clothes to the heat, and singing the song of the Homeward Bound when the

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last great fight is won. And without doubt, it is a song to make the pulses gallop.

No man thought to thump Buck because he had packed candles, butter and cutlery loose in one sack.

"Sure, it's all good aitin' when ye shut ye're eyes fast enough," said Tod, and was forthwith pitched into a corner for stepping on Conlon's new-made damper. The content of all the world was in Ted Douglas' face and in his voice. And this was quite to be understood; for the boys had proved themselves, one and all, for the honour and good of Mains and of their manhood. Steve muttered four words to him that made his eyes flame.

"It's you helt 'em," he said.

Then someone kicked the door open, crying:

"Can you chaps put up three more to-night? We're out o' our reckonin', an' it's brutal dark."

"Ach, come in be all manes," cried Tod; "if so be ye'll excuse as we ain't dressed for callers."

His coat and shirt smoked before the fire; but Lou wore a blanket only, and Raplin was still wringing the water out of his trousers. A couple of swags rolled inside the door, and Steve bounced across the hut promptly.

"Ain't got a spare pair o' boots in there, are yer?" he demanded. "Big ones?"

"You be blowed, Steve Derral," said the first



man. "I didn't was a ellerfunt ever. But perhaps Jimmie——"

Then the boys gasped. For two men were musterers from Glenhula, and the third man was Jimmie Blaine.

Danny rescued from the flame the shirt that Ted Douglas dropped as he jumped forward.

"Jimmie! Hello, 'Jimmie, old boy——"

Jimmie swung his back to the eager hand.

"I ain't talkin' wi' you," he said.

Silence cut sheer down through talk and movement, so that the shudder of the tent-flaps out in the wind sounded loudly. Murray had sworn secrecy on the boys who had come up from the township in the last week to bring the sheep in to Mains. But Scott broke his oath with deliberation. It was Danny's unshaken opinion that Scott would cause dissension even among the worms that should eat him.

"Per'aps Ted ain't any too keen hisself ter be speakin' ter a liar an' a thief," he said.

Jimmie slid out of his oilskins, and his peaked face flamed.

"Who you callin' names?" he demanded.

"You," said Scott, in simple explanation; and Lou, propped against the wall in his grey blanket, grinned on the pipe-stem. He had seen a court-martial before, with himself on the drum-head. Then Mogger paid in his contribution:

“Did yer tell Murray as it was Ted lifted all Buggy’s rhino, an’ let the old chap peg out wi’ his ribs stickin’ together? Did yer, you—— Spit it out, or we’ll make yer.”

Ted was staring, the colour gone from his face, his hand shut on Mogger’s shoulder. Steve saw only that the shock of this had caught him full-flood and unprepared.

“Ted,” he cried. “Ted, old man, yer needn’t think there’s one o’ us believes it! If it was twenty thousand gone ’stead o’ two, we’d not think as you took it, Ted.’

Ted put him aside.

“Jimmie,” he said. “What are they sayin’, Jimmie?”

“We’re tellin’ him as he stole it himself——”

“That’s a lie,” said Ted, speaking through his teeth. “Are you going to take it back, Raplin?”

“Ask Jimmie will he plaze tell Raplin that same,” suggested Tod, and Scott laughed.

“Jimmie’s got other fish to fry,” he said. “How yer goin’ ter prove in Court as Ted tuk it, Jimmie? Yer telled Murray yer would, yer know.”

Lou put aside the smoke-wreath gently, looking over at Jimmie. And Jimmie stood with loose hands, and a brain that would tell him nothing. Once before the boys had had the handling of him in their wrath, and he had been very much afraid. But there was that in the

faces now clogged his blood, and made his tongue dumb.

"Jimmie," said Ted, "you hear what they're sayin' of yer? Give them the lie, lad, an' I'll take it through fur you. I'll take it through on them all if you'll tell 'em, Jimmie."

"What would you have him tell?" said Conlon in contempt. "He fleeced the poor old beggar right and left, and then tried to put the blame on you. D'you think we're fools that we can't see that?"

"He *never* did! Jimmie, you must stand up to it now! Tell 'em, lad. Tell 'em it's lies—lies! We'll take it through together, Jim!"

The firelight was full on Ted's drawn anxious face, and flickering on the faces around. To Lou it was very funny that unbuttoned shirts and half-clothed bodies should belong to those faces. For they were purely savage in their just anger. Jimmie was glancing round with swift hunted eyes; but still he did not speak.

"Musha, it's the foine hayro an' all he is," said Tod. "Is it for a wake ould man only that ye have an answer on ye, me boyo?"

"Jimmie, haven't yer a word in yer, man? For God's sake give him that in his teeth!"

Jimmie opened his lips; but no sound came, and only Lou was beating a little tune on the back of his hand with his pipe-bowl.

"Jimmie!"

It was a cry that lifted even Lou's eyebrows with the pain of it. Then Scott stood up.

"Reckon as he ain't got no back-talk fur onst," he said. "An' reckon as we ain't chummin' wi' one o' his kidney what's not got the pluck ter stan' up ter his words. Tie him up, an' chuck him in a corner. We'll take him along ter Murray in the mornin'!"

Ted Douglas put aside the eager hands.

"Holt on a minute," he said; and a thread in his voice steadied them. "Jimmie told Murray under oath, I suppose; but he wouldn't guv me away here. He'd sooner take what yer said o' him than that. So I tells yer meself. I tuk all old Buggy's cash, an' he wouldn't tell, fur he knew as folks'd be offerin' him charity. Fur his dyin' like he did it's me to answer come Settlin' Day. Me—not Jimmie. But Jimmie was the on'y one as knowed it. Now ye all know."

Then he wheeled, and went out into the black night where the wind raved.

"And that's the biggest lie Ted Douglas ever told," said Steve.

But Lou answered for more than one when he said:

"Where's your voucher for that, eh?"

## CHAPTER XII

"You know where he's gone," said Ted Douglas, fiercely. "He comed down here last night, an' he wi' every man's lyin' mouth agin him. An' this mornin' he's lighted out somewheres. Where is he gone? What did yer do ter him—fur he'd be sure ter come ter you, being a Carth'lic."

Father Denis reached a fat arm and clapped the door to, swiftly. For without, in the paddock that sloped to the creek, the school children were playing cricket, and sound carried far in the still air.

"I'm thinkin' we'd du foine wid no ears stretchin' too close," he said. "Jimmie Blaine, is ut? Yes, he came tu me. What then?"

"They put the lie on him up at the Iron Hut," said Ted, speaking with stiff lips. "I know as Jimmie don't know nothin' nor ain't told Murray nothin'. But yer can't argue wi' them boys, so I tuk the whole blame an' had done wi' it. Most on 'em ain't spoke wi' me since. That's easy righted. But I want ter know does Jimmie think they'll put it on ter him fur truth? I'd 'a' knocked their silly heads

off of 'em straight-away; but—but he'd sooner take all their lip than my help. He were proper mad wi' me. An' now he's gone, an' I don't know where. Is he 'feared, Father Denis? He—he ain't jus' got all the pluck a feller needs these days, yer see."

"You know why he has gone," said Father Denis, gravely.

"I don't," said Ted, bluntly. "Would I be askin' if I did?"

"Is there wan ov us does not know from what the ould man said that ut is your own blame or his, Ted Douglas? An' yer own heart tells ye that ut is not tu yersilf."

Ted's eyes darkened. Then he straightened, speaking slowly.

"You're tongueing wi' the pack, too, are you? All right. It was me as tuk it—never Jimmie. The boys know. I told them. An' now I tell you."

Father Denis fumbled with his pipe, laid it down, and spoke huskily.

"Throth! ye nade not thry that fulish game on wid me, bhoy. Ut was wan or the other ov ye, Ted, an' ut was him. I know ut ahl from his own mouth. He did ut, an' he wud shift the blame ontu yersilf because ye have shamed him befure his mates, Ted Douglas."

The strong young face opposite was blank. The big hard hands groped on the table cover. Father Denis glanced toward the shadowed

blurr that was the girl on the wall, and his mouth was dumb with pity. For he knew that neither God nor devil calls man to more sacred or sterner trusts than friendship demands. Then Ted's words came with a rush.

"He never! He never! Oh, Heaven above us, ye're lyin'! Not Jimmie! Not him!"

"Ut is thruth, bhoy, word and word. He gave ut tu me at the Confessional wi' the fear ov ould Buggy's death lyin' on his sowl tu loose his tongue."

Ted caught his breath in a half sob, turned suddenly; bending his knee on a chair seat, and bowing his head over his arms on the table. Father Denis coughed, once and twice, and walked over to the window. Through the warm sweet gloaming the sound of laughter and the crack of the bat came sharply. Along the clay bank a merry row of girls clapped the boy who caught the ball and fell on his back with it. Time was when Father Denis had watched Jimmie and Ted Douglas run between the sticks, and had thrown bull's-eyes as reward.

"If ut had not been Confessional!" he muttered. "Begorra! whoy cud I not take the kickin' little beast be the scruff ov the neck an' hand him over tu Murray straight at once?"

The breast of Ted's coat brushed his shoulder. Ted had come straight from a full day's draughting on Mains, and the taint and dust of

the yards was on him yet. But neither noticed it.

“Do you know where he has gone, Father Denis?”

“Whisht now! Take ut aisy, man.” The light tone did not run true. “There is overmuch throuble in the worrld for us tu be tuckin’ up our trousers an’ wadin’ into ahl we see. Jimmie was mate tu ye. Now he will not be mate anny more. Ye must shmoke yer poipe on that, bhoy—an’ ut is not entoirely cowlld comfort, ayther!”

“You don’t mean—for Heaven’s sake—he hasn’t——”

“Ye mean did he kill himself because there is blood laid tu his dure?” asked the priest, dryly. “I will answer for ut that he has not! He will be nursin’ his loife if I know anything ov Jimmie Blaine. For he has gone wid no absolution tu the dhirty sowl ov him. I cud not du much, him comin’ tu me in Confession; bhut I did what I cud. Ye will be cleared in a week, Ted, when he is over the say, or I cud not be tellin’ ye this much. An’ he will be havin’ a parcel ov careful years tu chew on his sins, for I did not lift the curse that was throublin’ him. Bhut—I was near afther givin’ him another wan tu set down besaide ut fur company——”

“Yer didn’t! Oh, yer didn’t do that ter Jimmie. You brute! Oh, you brute!”

“Tut-t-t! I wud not be takin’ that from ye



another toime, Ted Douglas! He is not wuth the mindin', bhoy. He is a clatterin' koradi shtick what will break over the fust knee that strains tu ut. He had not the pluck tu damn ye as he meant to du in the hate ov him. He was 'feared ov the bhoys—and good sinse tu him, tu! So he just run away out ov ut, leavin' ye tu bear ut till he is safe. Ye're on bail, Ted? Yes; of course. An' Jimmie would have been that same if Murray had been an hour earlier. By the Howly Powers! nivir did I want tu break the Confessional harrder than I did whin he came tu me. Ut is broken tu you, Ted. Bhut even he trusted ye, the mane little snoipe!" Then the big hand came on Ted's shoulder. "Ye must face it, bhoy. Ut is not the present disgrace ye're moindin'. Bhut there were men before this day poured ahl the luv ov their hearrts intu dhirty little cans that wud howld bhut the half. Bedad! ut's the dhirty little can an' ahl that Jimmie is, Ted, bhoy."

"Wait a bit," said Ted. He was breathing heavily, and through the twilight Father Denis could but guess at the force controlling voice and body. "Jimmie's my mate. If he telled you he done—all this, then he done it. He wouldn't stick to it before the boys."

Father Denis remembered the pitiless questioning which had drawn the bald truth from Jimmie.

"Ted, bhoy, he hates ye. Wud he have come down tu the township bhut tu forswear himsilf aginst ye? He meant that; bhut he had not the pluck tu du ut. Aye; let him go, an' be done wi' it, Ted. Ut is the shtick that the worrld will be breakin' acrost his back is the wan thing will du Jimmie good this side the Punishment Day. Wud I have sint him unshriven if I did not know ut? Bhoy, bhoy; ye're dear tu me, wan an' ahl. Bhut softness is not mercy tu a sowl ivery toime, Ted Douglas."

"I must go and find him," said Ted Douglas, staring straight before him.

"Ye will not be that ov a fule!"

"I must find him. He's that nervous, an' alone, an' weak. I'm strong."

"What wud Mains do widout ye?"

This knife went home as Father Denis meant it to do. For Mains was as dear to Ted Douglas as himself. But Jimmie was dearer.

"I can't help it. I wouldn't leave Mains fur nothin' else, an'—if the boys go makin' mistakes, an' me not there—— But I can't help it. Jimmie has got ter come first. Father Denis, if ever you loved anybody, you'd know!"

The ring of his voice through the dark room left silence. Father Denis' heart was bared to the girl on the wall. For, of a surety, she understood now, as she had not understood in life.

"I du know. I had tu cut it out ov me, bhoy. Bhut I hov no right tu counsel ye that same. Ye will go if ye will, Ted Douglas. An' if ye bring him back I'll give him that trouncin' me fingers was achin' tu give tu him lasht week. Good-night, thin. Ye'll see me agin before ye go?"

"I can't leave Mains till shearin's done," said Ted, heavily. "There ain't nobody kin take my place through shearin'. That'll be a month if the weather holds up, an' God only knows where he'll be gone to. But I ain't got the right to leave Mains in the shearin'."

He went out without more words, and took the beaten track home through the warm dewy evening. At close of the fourth mile, with the smoke of the whares rising soft grey from the rise beyond, he met with Maiden, and halted for the gay meeting all the township took from her.

"Did you see Crellin's cart across the Flat, Ted? No? Then I'll have my wits to cool a half-hour at the river. Ted, I been helpin' Miss Effie pack. She's goin' down to town tomorrow, you know, an' I been takin' her up some sewin'. I'll come round and lend Buck a hand next time you're goin' campin'. Shall I?"

"You'll be welcome," said Ted, absently, and tramped on.

Maiden's laugh lilted after him.

"You'll be sorry you promised me that, Ted Douglas," she called.

The burring of stones under quicker, heavier feet broke up the silence that hung with the long twilight of the south over rounded hills and gold-washed high road. Steve's voice came in her ear, diffidently:

"Cud—cud I be walkin' beside yer, Maiden?"

Maiden's eyes dropped swiftly. There was coquetry in them too subtle for Steve to see.

"The road's more'n a chain wide, isn't it? I think as there might be room for two beside me, Steve."

"That depends on how close yer let me come, Maiden."

Maiden laughed. For a masterful note was in the words suddenly.

Then she gave him permission to walk in the wheel-rut which his own drays had scored five inches deep; and she took the crown of the road, stepping daintily, with the quick step that Steve rejoiced to watch.

"I'm glad ter see as yer ain't got on that Army rig ter-night," he ventured presently, with his eyes approving the slim length of the print-frocked figure.

"There's some folks as is glad to see me in any dress," remarked Maiden.

"Oh! so'm I, o' course——"

"Then you're glad to see me in the Army dress?"

"I'll be blowed if I are!"

"You said you were, just now."

"I didn't mean——"

"What you said? Oh, thank you. I don't much care for talkin' with men as keeps all their truth for other men, Steve Derral."

"Yer don't know a man what does that."

Maiden was visibly disappointed.

"I thought you'd have said as Lou does," she said carelessly.

"He's pretty sparin' with it all round."

"Oh! there you are! You can never leave Lou alone! You daren't say that in front of him!"

Steve's great muscles tightened unbidden. He had been in the draughting yards since day-break; but there was no weariness in him.

"'Twouldn't be the fust time, anyhow," he said composedly. "D'yer want me ter tell him agin, Maiden?"

Maiden glanced across at the wheel-rut. Steve was outside size, and a layman would have called him clumsily built. But they that saw him stripped for fight on North-of-Sunday testified to the brawn and muscle that no tallow had overlaid.

"Steve!" it was almost a whisper. "I wonder if you'd do somethin' I asked you to?"

"Near anythin' on God's earth, my girlie."

"Well—keep in the rut for a start, please—I don't want you to fight wi' Lou no more, Steve."

Steve rubbed his nose. There was a lump on the side of it yet.

"'Cos it spiles his beauty or mine?" he demanded tartly.

"Because—because it's unmoral."

Steve bellowed a great laugh from his chest.

"Ye learned that from the Lassies, didn't yer? Well, my girlie, I kin tell yer as there's lots o' words a sight more moral when they're said on yer fist than on the p'int o' yer tongue. An' the or'nary man'd feel pretty sick if yer wouldn't let him use neither, sometimes."

"It—it must be wrong to fight, and—not to love everybody," said Maiden, fumbling round the lesson that the Lassies had taught her.

"I'm content wi' lovin' one, anyways," said Steve, tramping on unabashed. "Hev yer asked Lou ter turn Sunday-school, too?"

"Ye—yes."

"Good fur you! What did he say?"

Maiden's forehead burnt. All women and many men knew that a promise must be bought from Lou.

Steve grunted, and his great fist shut in his pocket.

"Jes' come here a minute, Maiden, will yer?" he said, and took three steps to the side of the permanent way.

Maiden looked down the steep trend of bracken and flax to the tussock of the gully where Lou was cutting out a beast with Moody and Beckett to swing the mob. The lights were soft and shining in violet and amber and pale gold, and all the delicate sensuous scents of flowering cabbage tree and crushed raupo by the hoof-tramped creek rose up to them.

"Lou's the cleverest chap I knows, in his own place," said Steve. "His own place. An' that's atop o' a horse, Maiden. When he gets ter interferin' wi' another chap he's got ter learn sense. See?"

Maiden rested her elbow on a kowhai stump, tilting her chin with a delicate forefinger.

"No," she said deliberately. "I don't see."

"I thought yer wouldn't. That's why I got ter larn him instead."

Maiden flashed upright, white with fury.

"How dare you, Steve! how dare you! I don't know what you mean——"

"Then I don't see no call to git waxy 'bout it, is there?"

Maiden halted; kicked at a bunch of nodding evening primroses; then laughed.

"If you're comin' to the Oddfellows' dance nex' Friday I got the first dance goin' begging, Steve," she said.

"Thought as yer b'longed ter the Army now."

"I—I haven't joined yet. I'm not sure—but I'd like to do folks good some way, Steve."

"My girlie, yer kin do it a better way than by larnin' the evil fust yerself. It's a almighty fine work them Lassies do, Maiden, but it ain't fur the likes o' you. Can't yer be content wi' doin' one man good?"

Maiden glanced down the gully where Lou swung back in the saddle with the snake of the lash hissing round his head.

"He do need it," she murmured.

Steve straightened, biting back a word on his lips.

"Maiden, yer a little caution," he said. "There ain't nuthin' a fellow knows 'bout yer but as yer ain't never twice alike. Well yer knowed as I wasn't meanin' Lou. But if so be as you does, Maiden——"

"There's Crellin's cart," said Maiden. "I'm goin' to run. An' you needn't chase me down to the bridge, 'cause it'd look undignified."

Steve said more than one thing under his breath as Crellin's strong hand helped her up. Then she turned on the high seat, and through the dusk her little handkerchief flapped out at him. He swung off his cap.

"Bless her!" he said. "She ain't meanin' all her nonsense, my girlie."

As the cart rattled down the track by the gully, Maiden's handkerchief blew out again.



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And this time it was Lou who made answer, sending a long sweet whistle through the gloom.

Steve saw from the top. But he did not say anything of moment.

## CHAPTER XIII

FOR a week there were men who said hard things of Ted Douglas: men who suggested that he had cause to know why Jimmie Blaine had disappeared utterly and beyond power of Murray's searching. But they did not know that Murray was not searching very particularly, although Lossin grumbled over it one day, whilst Tod and two more from Mains sat on the edge of Blake's horse trough and watched the teams drink. Father Denis had told Murray the truth that morning before breakfast, and when the Court sat at midday, Ted Douglas had been publicly cleared with apology. Then he went to see Jimmie's mother, with Father Denis at his side, and the rest of the township sifted the story through their fingers in the lunch hour. They called Jimmie by some names that do not look well in print; they shied from much talk of Ted, because the prick of shame was on them that had doubted him, and then they talked of Murray. Tod gave his opinion first.

"If ut was Murray as he used to be he would

have found it out a long toime ago. Bhut do we not know that somethin' has put the fear an' all into him? An 'who wud it be but Pipi, the ould omadhaun?"

"We-ell," said Steve, slowly, "where's the sense o' goin' arter Jimmie, anyways? Old Buggy hadn't a relation belongin' to him but hisself, and who would be puttin' in a claim fur the money?"

"Murray ain't got the heart fur his work, though," said Danny, wisely; "an' ye kin bet yer teeth it's Pipi's blame—what? Sartinly, yer kin call it rot, Jack Yates, but it's truth fur all that. Didn't yer see it in the parlour that night? Well, ef yer didn't see, I kin't help it. There ain't been a machine invented fur givin' a chap brains yet."

"It was Lou should 'a' footed that bill," said Derrett, and Blake grinned.

"Lou's name won't hold good fur all the bills he orter foot. But Murray's——"

"Shut it!" Steve enforced command with his elbow, and the men drew together to see Murray go by with a face that had no right to belong to that uniform. For it was the face of blank fear. Thrice before the street-turning he glanced back over his left shoulder, hastening speed at each glance.

Hynes whistled, and spat into the gutter.

"Shore 'nuff, Murray has rats," he said; and Lossin gave echo, with the addendum that he

did not care to have the safety of Argyle depending on a cop with rats.

Steve scowled, gathering up the lines, and wearing his own team round.

"Don't you fret," he said; "Murray roped the Packer in last night what has been goin' it gay fur a week. He'll git you all right when he comes wantin' yer."

Over the hill, on the Lion, Murray was speaking of the Packer to Ormond. Ormond had not seen Murray this month past, and the sight shocked him. For the man was white-lipped and nervous; his well-knit body had fallen away, and his chin twitched. Ormond made place on the dried warm tailings, and tipped tea for the other out of his lunch-billy the while he mined craftily for confidence.

"Yes, I'll send a man over to bring in the Packer's tools," he said. "Not that I think any one would sneak them. They're patched with every imaginable thing under the sun. And what the devil is the Packer patched with, Murray? He's a wonder! At his age, too! I couldn't stand it—or you."

"We breed good men yet—for more than drink," said Murray, absently.

Ormond's eyes lit as he blinked downhill through the run of sunshine to the creek bed where Gordon and three more staggered under weight of a twenty-one-foot pipe.

"We do so. There's every breath of four

ton in those pipes, and the fellows have been lugging 'em downhill these six hours. We're going back to paddock work again, you know."

"There's one good man in Argyle who's been bred for drink, I'm thinking," said Murray, irrelevantly.

Ormond's palms ceased movement on the half-rubbed Navy-cut.

"Randal?"

Murray nodded.

"He's driving Conroy's coach since Scannell cleared him. But he won't last long at that. If he'd only have the sense to cut the country there might be a chance for him. But——"

"There are two ways of going through the world," said Ormond, dogmatically. "The one is to know your own weakness and the other man's strength. That gets you down every time. The other is to know your strength, and the other man's weakness; and that gives you the pull as often as you want it. Unfortunately, Randal knows his weakness——"

"And the other man's strength?"

"Precisely. The man in this case being——"

"Kiliat? Yes; I thought so."

"Not that he has any strength of any kind," explained Ormond, coming to his feet. "I fancy his nurse must have put him under a force-pump in his infancy, and drawn out all his brains to make pap of. But he has a certain

way with women that answers just as well, under existing circumstances. Coming along down, Murray? Or are you out on business?"

"No—I'm off again to-morrow, though. Plain-clothes job." He laughed unmirthfully. "Chap hasn't a chance to grow fat in such an infernally big district," he said.

The control of his voice was too careful. Ormond had noted it all along, remembering the life of the man before him. By day or night, on saddle or on foot, Murray's work lay in the hunting of men. He ran them down in the township, in the bush "pubs," in the gold country, where they fled to herd with odd thousands of their fellows, in the lonely ranges with none to come between the curt menace of the revolver and the defiance of the cornered one. He brought them to punishment such as a prison holds for limited months. He brought them to punishment such as the Argyle lock-up afforded the Packer for two sleepy days, and to punishment such as ends in six feet of earth with no name atop. But eternally to punishment; seeking out the evil that is in man, so that it might be hidden from other men.

Knowing all this, Ormond shivered a little on the hot hill-top.

"You're looking seedy, Murray," he said. "Can't you manage a holiday, eh?"

"There's no holiday will take a man away from himself," said Murray, speaking sudden-

ly. "Life can't do it. Nor Death. Nor Eternity. Ormond, it is the cruellest thing Divine power could do to decree that a man can't get away from himself through all the ages and ages and ages——"

"What the thunder do you want to get away from yourself for?" demanded Ormond in amaze.

"I don't know. If I did I might block it. It's because I don't know—because I can only fear——" He glanced quickly over his left shoulder and wheeled. And he did not see Roddy Duncan staring through the broom, with his half-eaten lunch on his knees.

"Ormond," he said, coming back, "you heard about my roping in Pipi Wepeha's son, and about the old chap coming into Blake's one night and telling yarns that made more than one fellow feel a bit sick?"

Ormond grunted curt assent.

"Since then," said Murray slowly, "I know a man's soul can be sensitised to things that his brain can't understand—that his tongue can't put into words. You see the sweat ooze on the green scarf of a tree, and you know by that how a part of it realises the death, though it can make no sign. There is a part of a man is as helpless as that, Ormond."

"Oh, don't be a blatant ass," said Ormond, impatiently. "I'm as much a man as you, I reckon, but I'll swear that my soul is a thing

under command of my brain and my tongue—as it should be. What else can rule it?”

“My God!” cried Murray. “Don’t you see that I don’t know? I don’t know what it is that—that has got hold of me. It is only that I know that there is more on earth—that there is more in the day and night than there used to be, Ormond; everything is so awfully alive. If you listen you can hear the hills breathing.”

Ormond came to his feet, and took Murray by the shoulders.

“You go away down to Dunedin,” he said. “Get an exchange. Go and marry someone—anyone. Do something that’ll get you run in on your own account. Take a town-beat, and go to music-halls every night. In a week you’ll find that your own life holds enough interest for you to sharpen your teeth on.”

Murray laughed, kicking loose stones down to the stream with a clatter.

“Haven’t you seen a tired kid crying its heart out, with no one in all the house able to give it what it wants, because it doesn’t know, itself? You can’t help me, Ormond, because I don’t know what I want. I don’t know.”

Ormond tapped his pipe stem on his teeth, looking round on his world as he knew it. The tall straight cabbage trees on the slope were familiar; and the rising terrace on yellow terrace to the ragged flint hills beyond. The greys of sand and shingle down the Changing



Creek were familiar, and so were the bellows of laughter from the men feeding in the gay sunlight by the pipes. The pallor of the toi-toi plumes meant nothing, nor the blood-red biddy-bid spread over the scarp behind the Glory which men called Fighting Hill. Ormond had never asked for the legend.

“Any fellow can scare himself dead in a month if he lets imagination take grip enough. But I didn’t think you were quite such an ass, Murray. So long as a man dresses by his reason he does his work as he should do. But once he loses step——”

And then came something headlong from the dead broom to clasp him about the knees, and to pray him, for God’s sake, to win Murray’s forgiveness for this horror that walked in broad day. Roddy’s eyes were set with despair, and his speech broke as Ormond jerked him to his feet in a sudden spate of anger.

“By the Lord Harry, but I’ve had enough of this tommy-rot for one day! What the devil do you mean by eavesdropping, you young——”

“Murray—tell Murray I did it. Don’t let him touch me. Don’t——”

“You needn’t fret. I’ll take as much out of you as Murray could if I find you deserve it. Stand up and speak when I tell you. Now—what have you got to do with this?”

"Pipi—I gave him Murray's red necktie. He wanted to makutu him. I—I couldn't help it."

"If you're drunk at this hour," said Ormond, "I'll take you down and souse you in our new paddock. If you think you're speaking truth——"

Murray put him aside, grasping the boy's arm in hot fingers.

"Don't be scared, Roddy. I won't hurt you. Now tell me."

By patient questioning the two wrenched from Roddy all that he knew. Then Ormond looked at Murray standing blank-eyed in the sun of the hill-top, and the sweat of unformed dread sprang on him.

When a tohunga has hate for one of his kind that man presently withers and dies as a blown leaf on a tree. But this arrangement is between Maori and Maori, when kindred blood, and ignorance, and minds soaked in generations of superstitions and in knowledge of things that the white man does not know of must come into account. By all the laws of Heaven and Earth a white man has no right to submit his soul to a brown man's curse. By all the understanding that thirty-five years of life had given Ormond knew that Murray had done this thing, albeit unwittingly. He spoke quickly.

"Murray! Don't look like that, man! It's

all rot. Rot! Go down an' strangle the old brute with your necktie, and then you'll feel better. There is no sense in it, I tell you. Roddy's burbling."

Murray plucked at his waistcoat front. It hung absurdly loose.

"You see," he said, very low, "I never knew; but it's taking the flesh off my bones, and the nerve out of my heart, all the same. Have you got any answer for that?"

Ormond was trying to interpret things according to his machine-trained understanding.

"Pipi could curse my whole wardrobe till it rotted for all I'd care. Murray, you're an Englishman. Don't you know better than to show funk before a Colonial?"

"Lou telled me," muttered Roddy, shaking on his feet. "He said it meant things that hadn't got any words to 'em. He said you'd know it in the smells that come out o' the swamps at night, an' in the birds never singin' near you. Don't say as you does know it! Don't say Pipi's killin' you 'cause of me! Murray! Murray! I ain't done that! For the sake o' God, don't say as I've done that!"

"Murray," said Ormond, and Murray answered to the spur unhesitatingly. For the knowledge of the irrevocable is a man's trouble only.

"We all have spells of funk occasionally,

Roddy—except the boss, here. I heard Pipi's yarns that night, as you did; and I have let them work on me—also as you did. That's all there is in it, of course; and it's the toe of my boot that Pipi'll get instead of neckties when I run across him again. But the next time I catch you nosing into my private insanities I'll give you a bigger licking than ever your fears gave you, Roddy."

Ormond slipped his pipe into his pocket, and settled his shoulders comfortably under the old coat.

"Insanities," he said; "that's the truest word you've spoken this day, Murray. Take old Pipi round the township on your boot-leather, and I'll guarantee you won't hear anything worse than your own snoring at night. You cut along down, Roddy. I'm just coming."

But when Roddy had gone he put his hands on the other man's shoulders.

"Murray, old chap," he said.

Murray's eyes did not lift.

"Don't!" he said in his throat. "Don't! I've got to battle it out on my own. I can't understand. But I've got to meet it alone, Ormond."

"Murray——"

"You can't help, old chap. Let me go. I can't understand—no, I won't go under if I can help myself. So-long."

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“I’d like to wring young Roddy’s neck!”  
said Ormond.

Then he went downhill to bolt the flanges of  
twelve-inch pipes.

## CHAPTER XIV

“WAKE, you lumber’ead! wake! Jump inter your clothes an’ come down. There’s a suicide. Somebody’s took pizen in Phelan’s. They says as he’s prayin’ an’ repentin’ on every doormat in the ’ouse, an’ requestin’ a doctor. Will you wake up?”

This was the first watch of the night, and Randal growled in his bed as Conroy shook sleep from him with frantic hands.

“Sling it up. Who’s the johnny? Oh—I don’t care, anyway, Conroy. Let me sleep.”

Conroy struck a match to the candle, and his shock head and strained eyes sprang out of the dark. He ran the whole coach service of the district, and at this present he ran Randal as well. Incidentally, Randal was the neatest driver he had known these six years.

“Didn’t ’ear ’is name. Murray’s bringin’ him round here. I’ve ordered a team inter the old coach, an’ you’ll take the chap down to Three Corners, eyes out. We ain’t wantin’ no inques’ held in Argyle.”

Randal sat up and blinked where reflection

from a lantern below travelled round the bare wall and was gone. Beyond the window the still night was crazy with clatter of boots on the flags, and grating of wheels and the ring of iron on stone as startled horses plunged out of the boxes. And the pelted talk of the stableman was virile and very real. He rolled out on the floor.

"It'll take the all of two hours. Will we catch the train? Is he bad yet?"

"There was too many tellin' fur me to know anythin'. You got to be back in time to take the reg'lar coach down. That's all I care. An' as I had to guv yer a scratch team, you've got the old coach, Randal. It don't matter if you smash that up."

"D——," said Randal, and clawed round the bedfoot for his clothes.

He took the steep back-stairs three at a time, and raced round to the mews. The stir of haste and disgust leavened all things. The men showed half-clothed in the lantern flashes, and from the moving rush of strenuous faces and hairy glossed quarters a voice cursed, copious and profound. Randal was utterly weary, for he had been on the box all day. Besides, he was robbed of the sleep which only gave him forgetfulness. He dived in where the jangle of steel sounded round the coach bulk, and grabbed a stableman under the fore carriage.

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"What are you giving me? The Thunderer mare! Good Jupiter! What else?"

A couple of men step-danced with the mare to her place on the off lead; from a wheeler came the steady sound of practised kicking, and three voices gave information as one.

"Boss said not crawlers nor reg'lars, so——" "Ah, but it's all one to you, Randal. You'll manage anythin' with hide on——" "So we guv yer goers, an' if yer larrup the mare circumstantial at the offset——" "Arrah, phwhat matther annyways? Young Art's neck is not wuth breakin' at all, an' Randal cares just that much for himsilf, ivery inch."

"Art!" said Randal, and dropped the girth he was handling. "Art Scannell?"

"That's him every time," said Lossin from somewhere. "They're bringin' him now. Crickey! He ain't dead yet."

Randal caught at a flange of the great wedge of men that surged past.

"Derrett! Is he suffering?"

"Not pertic'lar. They've loaded him up wi' whiskey what'd scupper any or'nary man, an' he aint curlin' an' he ain't drunk. Jest pious! An' that's a new line for Art. He's bin playin' wi' the Salvation Army o' late."

Murray's quick, alert tones cut the raffle of sound, and Randal saw the flash of his strong face above some dark struggling thing.



“Make way there! Make way! Where’s the door? Now——”

Quick hands punted the struggling thing into the coach bottom, and Murray leapt after. Randal heard the door slam as Lossin yelled cheerfully:

“Git the old hearse agoin’, Randal. Make her chirrup!”

Randal was overlooking traces and head-stalls rapidly and with care; for instinct asserts itself above the senses. He took up a hole in the mare’s throat lash, and she reached with the speed of a striking snake, so that the front of his shirt and some flesh below came away in her strong buck-teeth.

Randal buttoned his coat and climbed to the box. The floodtide of fury will sweep out all other sensations, and just now he wanted only to be where he could kill the mare scientifically.

“Stand clear down below! Let ’em rip!”

Gentling hands dropped from four wild-eyed heads, and the team canted all ways. For they were unwarmed as yet, and in temper pure devils. Murray jammed Art Scannell in the coach corner with a stout leg, and clung on by such power as he had. And a quiver of excitement throbbed in the sluggish blood that weeks of dread was beginning to chill. From a loose box door Lossin was earnestly averring that he did not envy any of those three who were assuredly going to perdition inside of

two minutes. Murray laughed to hear; and to hear the steady talk of the long whip, and the pulsing fire of hoofs as the four mad beasts in the chains bucked and ran back on each other and fought the weight of the bit.

On the box-seat Randal was unerringly gaining command. The team dropped back on its haunches, took breath, and sprang with a crash that made the old coach leap like a landed fish. Randal swung then hard for the alleyway, and Art Scannell thrust his head through the window before Murray could block him.

"I'm going to glory!" he cried. "I like it! Fellow-sinners, take what's-his-name, and come along to glor——" Then the flash of lamps, and the darting tongue of the long lash and the blown foam from wide-set nostrils, passed on to the unbroken thunder of hoofs that roared into the night up the road.

Randal eased the pull, and settled his feet in the irons.

"Go it, you serene cripples," he said. "But if you're not blown in four miles, we'll be all to glory with Art."

Then realisation struck down on him, making him giddy for one moment of horror. Effie! What would Effie say to him if he lost Art for her? By her love for her twin Randal had first caught her. By it he held her, fearing

ever lest the chord should break. And every breath told him that it must break, soon or late.

The team was half raw and purely mad. It charged the heavy tree shadows blocked out on the road as if they were fences, and took them flying. The coach rocked and bucketted; the lamp-light shook in speckles from the wild up-flung head of the mare to the long straight wither and neck behind her. Something ribbed like a whaleboat was mate to the mare. It bored with a steady sidelong persistence that meant trouble. Straight ahead the road ran into the stars, and the wind blown from their far cold glow whistled up under Randal's coat to numb the trickle of blood down his ribs. He was twisted sideways that the strain of his arm across his left side might deaden the pain, when Murray's head came through the front window. There was a ring in his voice that had not been there these two months.

"By Jove, Randal, it's good! Oh, it's good, man! They are cutting it out. It takes a man away from——"

"How's Art?" said Randal, unmoving.

"Seems pretty right. He's praying down there." Murray laughed easily. "By George, Randal! I'm glad Saurian was away up the Pass. I wouldn't have missed this—what are they going to do now?"

"Going to Hell, I think. Get back, and

don't let Art out of the door. I've got to navigate the cutting in two acts."

Murray disappeared. Randal wrapped the reins twice round his wrists, and took hold with fingers taut as Harveyised steel. With his nerve in his hands and eyes he wrenched the team sharp to the left, and braced himself between upright and foot guard as the coach took the curve on one wheel. Great cliffs shot up overhead. Beneath the mare's feet spurned shingle rattled down to far hurry of water. The clay bottom was greasy with recent rains, and the boat-ribbed demon lost footing, floundering ten yards with his weight on the man on the box. He recovered at a vein of scoria, with his nose in the manuka edging the cutting, and Randal felt his sinews crack as he bore with both arms to the leftward still.

Curve and curve and curve; with ever a nine-foot track, and the grade of one in five; and ever the unchecked gallop, and the sway of the clumsy coach. The wash of the water talked louder, swept up, and ran low through the wheels. Across the half-dried river bed, foul with broken trees and sand spits and sharp rocks that struck back fire to fire, Randal followed the ford as he might. Each day he took it at a paced trot. He had not passed it before on a hurricane. The cutting beyond was rotten and the underway patched. Randal knew each of the white sign posts of warning

that reeled away like drunken men. He held the path grimly; his eyes fastened on the writhe of the grade under the quivering lamp-light, and every sense answering in trained skill to the need.

The team breasted the top; unbeaten, undistressed and game. The macadam rolled through a green tableland where waked sheep and cattle fed in the long vernal scented grass. And here Randal dropped his hands and crouched. For the strain had been very cruel, and the blood-letting had weakened his grip.

Murray's voice came through the window.

"Are you in charge yet, Randal?"

"Yes—think I've got them under. How's Art?"

"Blest if I can make him out. I believe the young beggar is kidding us. He's absolutely happy down there, singing Army hymns——"

"What! Do you think he's all right, Murray? Do you think he's all right?"

The ring in the voice called many things to Murray's memory.

"I'd lay good long odds on it," he said.

"Then I wish to goodness you could get him through there, and hang on to the strings while I come in and wallop him, Murray."

Murray grinned.

"Pity to disturb him—listen——"

Above the uneven nervous gait whereby

Randal held the four together with delicate touch, Art Scannell was talking in a virile Saxon speech that brought laughter to both who heard.

"Randal, he's standing up—going to deliver his testimony. Go steady—pity to lose this."

The two giggled with an hysterical clutch at their throats. For pity and disgust marched with laughter at the delirious ribaldry of the boy's talk. The off-wheel lifted on a tussock, and the babble broke with a snap.

"Short-circuited him that time," said Murray at the window. "He's under the seat——" The clap of the door came on the words, and Murray's shout:

"Randal! He's out! Randal! Stop, for the Lord's sake!"

Randal's start scared the team. It plunged, reached on the reins, and in that instant something swarmed up the wheel as a gorilla might have done, and fastened on Randal's shoulders, jerking him back to meet hot breath on his cheek.

"I've come up to drive," said Art Scannell, with quick lissom fingers sliding to the reins. "Give 'em to me, Randal. Curse you! Give 'em up——"

By the cut of the wind past his ear, and the spring that assuredly loosened his wrists in their sockets, Randal guessed at the payment

that should be required for Murray's carelessness.

He jammed down the brake; gripped up the reins in one hand, and fought for his own life and the boy's as best he might.

And something in the back of his head was saying:

"D—— Murray! I wish he was in behind there to take it with us."

The team ripped over the saddle with the coach rocking, and Randal guarding the reins, half choked, and very nearly mad with pain at the opening wound on his chest. Art Scannell was kneeling on the box with his dark boy face level with Randal's. The thick-lashed eyes and straight features were cruelly like Effie's, and the words on his mouth were such as sickened Randal. The boy's hands shut over Randal's, and the whole weight of his body lay across the taut arms. Randal felt the team check, swing to the strain, and heard the sob of soft grass cut under the hoofs. His hands slid, snatched, held again; and he came to the box bottom with Art. Here they fought, with Randal doubled sideways, and the handling of the reins his yet, though control had gone this long time past. Art Scannell's arms were warmly close about him, and the smooth cheek rubbing Randal's was torture. He crushed the boy down, kneeling on him, forcing him with all his gasping strength; and round

him, and overhead, rose up the ghost country, haggard, void and unending. Under him Art Scannell struggled, cursing, and scratching as a weka scratches with spurred wings and feet. Dead trees reeled past, white stripes on the broad back of night, with long shaggy moss blowing from them like a beard on the chin of Death.

"That is a dead man calling me across the distance," said Randal, speaking without volition, for sense told him that it was a mo-poke frightened by the galloping hoofs.

Beneath his knees Art Scannell was still, and a fear colder than death took him by the heart strings. He half rose. And then Art Scannell caught him about the middle, and the reins were gripped in his white young teeth. The bleared trees drew in, right and left; plunged at Randal, and held him fast. This was Death, with a tearing pain in the sinews, and that dead man calling as a bird calls in the middle of the night.

A sentence struck him from no given place as the leaders rammed a tree butt and turned the coach over. It was curt, and very intense, and it never came out of the Prayer Book. But it brought Randal to his feet.

"By ——, Murray!" he said, "have you been there all the time? Where's Art?"

"I don't know where he is," said Murray, watching the wheelers kick the fore-carriage



into excellent firewood. "But I very sincerely hope he's had his neck broken. Didn't you hear me trying to get through the window?"

"This is a short cut into Three Corners," said Art Scannell, coming out of a bank of bracken with scratches blood-lined across his cheek. "Come along down, you two, and have a nip. I'll shout."

Murray fell on a white tree bole and rocked with laughter.

"I'll bet you will, my innocent. Just wait till Randal gets his hands on you——"

"Just put your back into this, and shut up," said Randal, in vivid command; and Murray went where the noise of straining leather and burst wood was calling. Randal loosed the four, and slashed at the latest with a curse.

"They'll go home," he said, "and Conroy will have to send an engine or firestick for the coach. Come on. I've got to hunt up a horse to get back with."

"Couldn't you have ridden——"

"No, thanks. Nor could you. I know those four. Besides——"

He staggered a little, pulled himself up, and trudged forward. Art Scannell followed, singing after his kind, and Murray tailed in the rear, marvelling that he did not slay young Art and bury him in a decayed log.

The angels had strung all their diamond

necklaces across the purple velvet of the sky; and their pure breath was in the night air, and the shadow of their wings on the far hills. Randal stumbled between the shed pits of the matai trunks and the long slivers of ribbon-wood bark; climbed a wire fence; crossed a paddock with bog and a smell of pigs, and came to anchor before the Three Corners Hotel. Murray, closing up, saw the horrible white of his face under the kerosene lamp hung out for the 2 a. m. train. He caught at the shoulder that swayed, as Art Scannell passed to the bar whistling.

“What have you done to yourself? Randal, you owl, you’re hurt——”

Randal was assured that his words came through a thick blanket.

“How—how’s Art?” he asked, for the third time.

“Art,” said Murray, distinctly, “was very drunk to-night, and tried a game on. He’s gone into the bar to get drunk again; but if he tries any more games, I’ll know why. Now, come in here, Randal, and let’s see what is wrong.”

Within the two ends of a half-hour Randal had quarrelled with Wallace of the hotel, with Murray, and with the three men who had turned up at the siding for the train. For he sat on the horse-hair sofa with twenty-one

yards of bandage rolled round his body by Murray, and defied them.

"You can talk till you're black," he said. "I've got to get back by seven. I've got to bring the coach down for the midday."

Art Scannell swung his legs from the table edge where he was nursing a half-glass of brandy.

"I'll drive you both back, and no questions asked," he suggested. "Though mind you, I do consider it jolly cheek of you both to bring me down here just to watch Randal bleed."

Murray felt in his pockets.

"My child," he said, "you had two emetics before you left Argyle, and you'll have another if you don't take a reef in that tongue of yours. Can you keep him here till midday, Wallace, and I'll drive Randal back if he's beyond persuasion?"

"I've got to take the seven coach down," said Randal, and came to his feet to clinch the matter.

Wallace provided his little trotter and a gig; and Randal made no complaint when they bumped over a broken culvert in the dark hour that goes before all sunlight. For the second time that night Murray forgot the creeping things that dogged him.

"You'll be in a fine state by the time those horses have pulled you about all to-day," he

said. "Why don't you take it easy, man, and let someone else have a buck at them?"

"I told Conroy I'd be back. I don't break my word if—if I can help it."

"Well, you can't help this. You——"

"Don't talk rot," said Randal, roughly. "Do you think I'd take it on if I thought I was going to peter out and mess things up? A man knows what he can do, and what he can't. Or if he doesn't he ought to."

To the break in his voice Murray gave a pitiful silence, and slowly the day came: not flushing with girlish shyness as she comes to dimpled valleys and homesteads, but standing grave and beautiful on the mountains, to press wreaths of blood-red thorns down on their snow, and to fling her great javelins of light from pinnacle to jagged scarp and bowed bared shoulder of flint.

The tussock deeps either side the saddle lay naked as an unseen hand swept the white mists out of them, and the very faint sound of sheep cropping grass came up through the new-made air. And the sunlight burst up the gullies, and along the hundred-foot river banks, striking their clay to beaten bronze, and chasing a riot of onyx and jasper and hyacinth-blue from bluff up to reaching bluff until all the western sky was laughing with it.

Murray pulled slow for the ford, and a little black-and-white stilt darted away from under

a niggerhead, its red legs flashing in the light.

"A new day is as solemn a thing to see as a new soul," said Murray, then.

Randal laughed in one syllable.

"The solemn thing, as I take it, is a soul that will never be new any more. But you see them every day."

"I don't," said Murray, taking his lungs full of scent-flooded air, as they rose the cutting beyond through gold and pearl of the flowering broom.

"You could if you looked," said Randal, carelessly. "How does time go?"

"Just six. Feeling very fagged, eh?"

"No, I'm all right, thanks. Lick him up a bit along here, can't you?"

"Don't you fret. I'll be up to time."

But with the flat daylight on the familiar things again Murray's torture woke and ran behind him, and neither man was speaking when the gig swung into the alleyway, and Conroy came out and asked questions.

Murray explained seven things in one sentence. Then Conroy said:

"You got ten minutes ter have a feed and a nip in, Randal; and then for Heaven's sake, take 'em if you can. I haven't got another man can handle that team wi'out makin' a blamed mess o' things."

"Keep your hair on. I'm going to take

them. Did—anyone send word up to Mains?”

“No. We waited ter hear the end of it—knowin’ young Art. He do have his own idea of a joke.”

Randal was on the box-seat as the men brought the team out to the street. He was crumpled, and tired—tired—until he could not remember a time when he was not tired. Then the jar of wheels was close on him; Effie Scannel pulled in the bay cob with a turn of her wrist, and tossed the reins to the groom beside her. There were boxes in the back of the cart. Randal saw them in one swift eye-flash. But he did not look again until it was necessary to stoop over and bring her up to the seat by the hand. The pressure in the meeting grip was hers only, and she said underbreath:

“I want to speak to you.”

Kiliat’s voice sounded at the wheel.

“You going down too, Miss Effie? Oh, I say! I don’t deserve such luck, you know.”

Effie leant over, speaking with quick little ripples of laughter as pole-straps and traces met buckled, and the mail bags were flung up to Randal. Behind, a heavy-footed woman and two complaining children made the body of the coach shake. The horses stirred impatiently with the freshness of the morning blowing on them, and yet Kiliat talked by the wheel to Effie.

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The quick twist of a grin was on Randal's mouth. He caught the heavy reins where they spun to him, and the brake flew up as the horses leapt as one.

Kiliat passed behind with a shout and a quick scramble that brought him to his knees in the coach-bottom. Randal cut the leaders with the lash, thanking Heaven that the coach carried no window.

"Say what you want to before we get to the bridge," he said. "I must walk over that. The offsider is too skittish."

"You—you haven't said you're glad to see me, yet, Guy."

Randal's deep breath was very nearly a groan.

"Does a man go about saying he is glad to be alive? What can I tell you that you don't know, Effie?"

Her hand was on his left arm, and her face was close to his shoulder, as Art's had been so few hours ago.

"Tell me that you're not forgetting me, Guy."

"Effie—don't! Dear, you don't know how cruel you are to me sometimes. I—wouldn't ask you that."

"I'm going to test you, Guy. I'm going away. For months; I don't know how many."

"Where?"

"The North Island—Sydney—Melbourne.

I'm going with Mr. Kiliat's mother and sister."

Randal took the turn to the coach bridge with absolute precision. Then he said:

"Have you anything else to tell me?"

Then the tears came, and she caught the lapels of his coat with a little sob.

"Guy! Guy! I don't want to go! Oh dearest, don't you understand that—that they are sending me away, Guy?"

"I understand. They are sending you away from me, Effie. And—it is better that you should go."

"It won't make any difference. I shall come back. You—you'll wait here for me, Guy?"

Randal stooped over and kissed her on the lips.

"I will wait," he said.

Then he drew rein on the bridge planking, and apologised to Kiliat when he came round to the wheel in white wrath.



## CHAPTER XV

"Looks like ole Joe Page ev'ry time," said Moody.

Danny spanked a hogget forward by application of the draughting gate, and smudged the sweat from his forehead.

"It don't look *like* him, yer idjit," he said explosively. "It is him. Now you just hook it, Joe. I ain't goin' ter be done wi' these pants 'fore shearin's over. An' there won't be anythin' but the equivocating buttings lef' then."

Joe was a password in the district sheds. He cadged a coat here, a pair of boots somewhere else, and cast dungarees and old hats by the score. He hooked his arms over the rail and smiled blandly.

"Yer'll kip the buttons fur me, anyways, Danny," he suggested.

"I'm makin' them inter a teething necklace fur me sister's baby," said Danny, stolidly. "Go an' ring yer little game onter Lou."

Further down the heat of the sun-swept race Lou was hustling sheep with his cap, with a manuka bough, with sharp whistles, and the

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power of his fore-bent knees. Above the noise and hurry of the draughting yards, and above the yap-yap of Danny's blue Smithfield by his foot, he heard and gave answer.

"Cut along into the shed, Joe, and ask for Mogger. You'll find him on the presses. He's always got things to spare."

"Joe—don't yer go ter do——" But a ram slewed the gate over with his horn, and Danny plunged into the tideway, vivid-speeched and alert, to turn the river that set awry to the yards.

All the glory of summer was over Mains, on the hills and the bush-dark gullies. All the savage glare and heat of it was over the yards where sheep cried and coughed, and shook the rails with the soft weight of their bodies; and where dogs were thick underfoot, noisy, clever and keen; obedient ever to the quick whistle, to the shout through the dust, and to the swerve of an up-flung hand. The races roared with choked life; the three draughting gates throbbed back and forth under power of quick eye and quick brain and quick hand. The dust was dry in each man's throat, and the grit of it between his teeth. And all the welter of sound and ruled haste and heat did not shake the compass point that he steered by. For a Colonial learns by doing, and by doing again; and this is the only true way to get technical skill.

The last ram butted Danny on the hip, so that he sent a kick after him as the gate swung idle. Then he sat on the rail to charge his pipe while Moody swept six more down the paddock to round up another mob.

"Yer a fair skunk, Lou," he said.

Lou cut tobacco slowly. The grease and dirt of sheep were on his bared arms and his shirt, and his boots were burst at the toes. But still there was something in the carriage of his head that would turn women and not a few men to look at him twice.

"Old Joe'll strike a snag in Mogger—unless he's wanting ribbons," he said.

"I 'opes as Mogger'll do some strikin' 'fore long," said Danny, with feeling, and took six sets of rails and a gate in answer to Steve's howl from the filling pens.

He snatched a gum stick from somewhere, dived into the ruck, and hammered the stumbling bodies up the grating to the bowels of the shed. Here new sounds and new stench held sway: the rasp of the presses forward, the mutter of the shears, the hundred other noises pent in by the dark of iron roof that creaked in the grasp of the sun rays.

There was smell of the tar-pot, and of sheep, and of heated men; and the strange oily scent of a well-yoked fleece. Danny slammed the gate behind the last straggler and made out for air, past the length of the board where

the men stopped dripping, and the fleecies swooped and circled like gulls.

"I've filled up wi' a entrancin' lot o' smellers this go, Creash," he said. "Come off of the Pinetop where we bin cultivatin' Californian thistle, they did."

Creash grinned, turning his sheep over.

"Takes the all of a sewin' needle to git through my hide. Go an' tell Luttrell. He's soft."

But Ted Douglas was telling Luttrell things at that instant. And Danny paused, smelling trouble. For he knew Luttrell's tongue, and he knew that "back-talk" was no tender to the shed boss on Mains.

"When I'm wantin' your biography I'll ask fur it," said Ted, with his hands deep in his coat pockets. "I don't care what you did in Orstralyer. A man who can't shear his two hundred there is a fool. But the man what does more than his one hundred here—on these sheep—he's goin' to git fired, an' don't you forgit it. We ain't over-keen on seein' fancy wool work under the Mains brand."

"Crewel work is the belligerent name fur it," suggested Danny; and Scott shouted from the loft:

"Are he wantin' a cork ter his shear p'int, Ted?"

"Not so much as you're wantin' it in your mouth," returned Ted, sharply.

Luttrell's great buck teeth showed under the ragged moustache, and his hands shook on the idle shears. But the steady eyes and voice broke him down. He swerved sullenly into the pen, dragged out his sheep, and opened up with the clean clever blow of the ringer. Danny grunted approval.

"The ole apostrophe!" he said. "He'd 'a' had the head off of anyone else as blocked him. But there ain't much leakin' on Mains wi' you at the sluices, Ted."

Ted gave no answer. He passed the tables with quick commanding sight on the wool bins, the branders, the hurrying fleecies, and the men that wrought with the presses and bales. At end of the south board he stood, and each shearer felt him there on the instant. Ted knew that they felt him, and the apple of his throat ached in sudden pain. For not Steve nor another was fitted to take his place in the shed, on the cattle camps, on the ranges in the mustering season. And yet, for Jimmie, he would leave Mains to fall or to fight according to the wisdom of Steve or another. Because this much is true of men all the world through: they give hand-and-lip service to a superior; but only to a leader of their class will they give thew-and-body service to the utmost. Scannell knew this when he laid power on Ted's shoulders; and Ted knew.

"On'y fur Jimmie," he said underbreath.

"I can't help it if there ain't another chap fit—Baxter!"

Danny heard the shout where he was draining a half-dozen pannikins by the big doors.

"Ted ain't sweet ter-day," he remarked, rubbing against a new-branded bale. "Did Joe come askin' him fur handkerchees an' hair-ile an' things, Ike?"

"Joe ast me," said Mogger, with his weight on the bale hook, and the muscles outsprung on his forehead. "He said as Lou tole him ter."

Scott grinned, jerking a thread from the twine hank.

"The game ain't ter the dealer this time, though," he said.

"What'd yer do, Mog?" Danny slung down the last pannikin, and stood upright.

"Jes' guv him Lou's coat. He lef' it here last 'Spell-o,'" said Mogger, composedly, and tumbled the bale into the brander's hands.

Danny fell over in abandonment of joy and giggled until the brander—who happened to be Scott—saw the smudged "First Combing," and tracked the final "g" to Danny's left shoulder. Thereafter, Danny went out headlong on the mass of sweepings drawn from the shed; picked himself up, and returned to the little gates in a kindly tenderness that puzzled Lou until he came for his coat after the night's cut-

out. This was long past the meal hour, for the work of the station hands does not snap with the shearer's bell; and thirty-seven men lay round the whares where the grass was tramped dust, or scattered down the long paddock in the dusk with the ring of quoits to mark them. Lou satisfied his hunger. Then he came out and satisfied Mogger, and, incidentally, Tod and several more. Tod was fullfed with happiness, for a mixed crowd was incense in his nostrils. He flung his vitriol dispassionately, while Mogger sat with outstretched legs in the dust, and told passers-by that "It was wuth it."

"Not as Lou's fists dun't git home quick as his tongue most times," he explained; "but it was wuth it. A reel good coat, an' no error. Joe called me a pattron, too. That means a banefactor ter Society."

"It don't," said Danny, whom Suse had initiated in several mysteries. "It means a thing as gels cuts their frocks on. Joe were pullin' yer leg, Mogger."

"I'd be a good pattron fur a gel ter cut a husbin' on, then," said Mogger, stretching himself. "Yer tell that ter Suse, Danny, supposin' she's wantin' ter change 'er mind 'fore it's too late."

"Arrah, bedad, it's only colleens loike Miss Effie has the sinse to do that," remarked Tod. "It's on wid Kiliat, all roight, now, an' off wid

Randal—more be token as he's shankin' downhill wid all the power lef' to him."

"Randal was allers a fool," said Scott, fallin' out of a dispute that had been over-hot. "He's workin' a hatter's claim up Chinaman's Gully now, and gittin' his washups from the Lion drainage. Makes a colour p'raps once in four days, he does. A fine sort o' life, that."

Someone spoke above the murmur of voices where the tobacco clouds hung on the dusk.

"Oh, go it! We're mighty ready to jump on a man for goin' lame. Suppose you hunt round for the last his boot was made on, next time."

"It's wise ye are," said Tod, dryly. "We buys thim ready-made, me bosthoo; an' wan lasht does for the lot—until it is worn out. Bhut it does not pinch us all."

Ted Douglas smoked slowly.

"You allers talk clever when you're not meanin' it, Tod," he said. "Till our feet is all made on one last, too, I reckon there'll gene'ly be some on us goin' lame."

A Queenslander sat up with a crackle of the brushwood stack at his foot.

"There's a time comin' when we'll make our own bloomin' lasts an' our own bloomin' laws," he said. "No ready-made foolery. We won't hev no corns then."

Danny rolled over, and pulled the accordeon toward him.



“Belike we won’t hev no boots nayther, yer contagious yard o’ shingle! Paddy, cut along in an’ tell Lou as the audience is requestin’ him ter come an’ oblige wi’ ‘The Ole Bullock Dray.’”

In the close dark of the eating-whare where the cook and the slushy juggled with tin plates and dirty water, Lou was drawing a three-shed cheque from young Benson by power of five cards and some science. He retired Paddy with direct insult, and the quoit players came back to raise choruses and to fling uncurbed jokes that angered Ted Douglas. He got to his feet, speaking curtly:

“I’m goin’ out to the river downs arter keas. Any on you comin’ along?”

Ike stifled a yawn and raised himself by sections. He was bone-weary, as every hand on Mains had a right to be. But when a man does not give jealousy he usually gives adoration to the other of his own age and rank who has distanced him.

“I am, Ted. Wait till I gits my gun.”

Steve had seen Ike sluicing the rust out of his old single-barrel the evening before, and he growled distinct warning until the tread of feet ceased to echo on the warm earth where he lay.

Past the woolshed gates the two fell on Scannell with his clever little 303 in his armpit. Not age nor sorrow of soul could kill

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the sportsman in Scannell, and he stepped it alertly; through manuka and tawhina scrub, round the swamp head, and up the tussock terraces beyond.

The dew had loosed scent on the still air. Scent of tussock and languid-sweet manuka bloom; of bush in far-below gullies, and cow breath and subtle smells from the flax and the faint evening primrose. To the westing the long, long afterglow quivered still in pale gold, and the rush of the river round the terrace foot sounded clear and serene. Ted was not speaking, for the calm of the night was steadying his soul against what should be. Ike listened, sharp-eared, for the kea call, and whistled out the answer gladly when sound caught them on the lip of the first slope.

They dropped over it as one, and unshorn ewes blundered away at their coming. But a dark heap lay on the breast of the tussock with a picnic party atop.

The party cursed in parrot jabber; drew off five paces, and cursed again. Guns spoke thrice with red fire. Then Ted came on his knee, feeling over the bloody wool for the kidneys that yet were warm.

"There's life enough in the blood to pull the p'ison through it," he said, and proceeded to work straightway.

Ike nosed his way forward carefully,

cuddling his old gun and walking the lean sheep track in the half light with the snarl of shingle on rocks straight below. Ted stood up, cleansed his hands in the tussock spines, and said:

"That makes the hundred, sir."

Scannell kicked at a fallen flutter of green and red feathers.

"Brutes!" he said. "They're hanging about late this year. We must work 'em systematically when shearing's done, Ted."

Ted's hand gripped on his rifle. He spoke very low.

"'Fraid you'll hev to git someone else to run that game. I—want to leave arter shearin's done."

"Leave! Leave! You don't know what you're talking about. Leave Mains! You couldn't do it, Ted."

"I wants ter leave after shearin'." Scannell caught the shake in the tone.

"Are you tired of the old life, Ted?"

"No! You knows I ain't! But—I wants ter go."

"Why?"

There was a silence. The very far murmur of sheep plucked at Ted's heart strings. The mighty head of the Brothers across the river and across the lower hills called him in every grand curve of it against the stars. At his feet the downs rolled away; dimpled, and lush

with feed for the sheep that he might not control at next muster.

"Why, Ted?"

"It's just—Jimmie. He might be wantin' help somewhere, an' I can give it."

"Jimmie? Jimmie Blaine? Ted, I won't believe that you are wanting to bring him to justice!"

Ted laughed just a little, standing big and still against the stars.

"Thanky, sir. No—Jimmie's my mate. He's easily 'feared, an' there's suthin' on his mind——"

"Quite likely," said Scannell, dryly.

. . . "An' bein' a Carth'lic he thinks a powerful lot o' dyin' unshrived an' that sort o' thing. It makes me sick o' times ter think what might be happenin' ter the little chap."

"He tried to ruin you, Ted. He would have perjured himself to do it if he had had the pluck."

"I loves him," said Ted, slowly. "An' love's the kind o' thing as yer can't let out the slack o' or wind it up jes' as yer like. He's weak as a girl, an' I loves him as I'll never love a girl. I must find him, sir."

Scannell was angry for the space of five minutes. Then he said something that hurt Ted more than the anger.

"I thought you loved Mains, Ted."

"Don't! Don't! You knows as I—I——"

Scannell's hand sought the hard young one, and gripped it.

"I'm sorry—but it's hard on me, too. I'll never get another headman like you, Ted. Well—you'll see us through shearing?"

"Wouldn't I have gone a month ago ef I hadn't meant that? Yes, I'll wait till that is done."

"Then," said Scannell, "we had better go on. For there is no more to say."

## CHAPTER XVI

“WELL! but I can't help it,” said Kiliat.

Ormond looked at him.

“No,” he said, “I didn't suppose you could. You're not built that way. But you can back me up when your father comes along to ask questions. And I think that he will probably come very soon. To-day most likely.”

“What—what the devil have you been doing?” cried Kiliat, in wrath.

Ormond was patching a nine-inch pipe. The pipe was red-hot in the sunshine; the plate was hot, and the tap turned stickily in his hands. He grovelled for a dropped bolt in the half-dried clay of the underway, picked it out, and said:

“I wrote telling him that I meant to chuck the whole thing if he is not here before Friday. And as he knows you pretty well, I fancy that he will be here before Friday.”

“Chuck it! You can't chuck it! I—I—I—can't run this plant, Ormond.”

Ormond raised himself, rubbing back the rough hair on his forehead.

“Then you’d better not go back on me when your father—which is your father, Kiliat?”

They were two stocky bull-necked men who stumbled over the heat-hazed shingle. From top hat to patent leathers they wore the gear of town life, and both were panting and purple with the labour. Ormond jerked his trousers higher through the belt strap, and straightened the shoulders under the loose shirt. His whole body was alive with fight. He had risked much in bringing directors up here; but all the rotten length of the Lion had called him dumbly once too often. He waited for Kiliat’s casual introductions; said just one thing in his throat when the boy slid down into the paddock where Gordon was working the second jet, and met the two promptly.

“I am very pleased to see you,” he said. “You would like to look over the plant, of course? And I presume that you got my letter?”

The other man—Ormond knew him for the chief of the directors—stared at the sullen network of pipes; at Ormond’s one-roomed whare behind the tin power-house; at white-faced Roddy shovelling the wash at the box tail.

“My soul!” he said. “What a place! What a ghastly place to live in!”

Ormond had lived on the Changing Creek seven years. He had shot rabbits in every shingle gully that fed it, from the penstock

right into Argyle. He knew it by hot sluggish day, and by perfect evening, and by fierce storm-racked night. And, beyond all places in the wide earth, it was home to him. Just a little he grinned, resting a foot on the main pipe. These fat men would never know the Lion.

“Did you get my letter?” he said again; and the life of the Lion was throbbing under his foot.

Then Kiliat the elder spoke. He told Ormond many things that Ormond knew far better than he did; he complained of Ormond’s constant demand for repairs; he desired explanation—full explanation.

“My son says that everything is in good order. We were given to understand that everything was in good order when we took the claim over.”

Ormond’s temper was waking.

“I can’t help what you were given to understand. It was not in good order. If your son were here as often as a manager should be he might know what he’s talking about. The flumes and trestles are rotten. I’m eternally patching them. If you’ll kindly come round here, and examine the pipes for the powerhouse and the Pelton wheel you might see the plugs in them. I have given a week’s work to each of those pipes this year. Then the jets——” Ormond wrenched an hydraulic jet



out of its elbow and rolled it forward. "We are supposed to be doing hydraulic work now, and the jet I'm using is the size of this one." He pulled out a measure and laid it over the lip. "Seven and three-quarter inches. It should be five and a half. How much pressure do you think we lose when the things are worn to that size?"

Ormond's flannel shirt was dirty; it was loose at the sunburnt neck, and his trousers were tucked anyhow into the long boots. But the two fat directors were nervous. The Lion did not look at all the same, laid nakedly here on the creek bed with a hard-eyed man standing over her to crush them with figures. Ormond had an unpleasantly virile grasp of his subject.

"Well, well!" said the chief of the directors. "I daresay we can manage a new jet for you. But you are asking for pipes; a quarter-mile of pipes; twenty-one foot pipes at six pounds apiece! We can't let you have those, you know. And you got some steel things without consulting us——"

"I had to have them. The plate topping the lift pipe was nearly worn through. I'd asked you twice."

"My son said that you had the box too close on the escape," said the elder Kiliat, wisely.

Ormond bit off the word that tingled his tongue.

"Your son says a good many things—to others," he said quietly.

"Well, you see, that was sheer carelessness. We were told you were a fairly capable man—I beg your pardon?"

"I didn't speak. Yes?"

"A fairly capable man, and—er—a fairly truthful one. You must give me leave to doubt the fact of your being either the one or the other, Mr. Ormond."

"Will you kindly tell me why?"

"Er—er—you have no right to take that tone with me, sir."

"I'll show you if I have in a minute. Why?"

"Kiliat, my dear fellow, perhaps you had better let me speak——"

"I won't! Curse it! D'you think I can't manage the man myself?"

If Ormond had been one whit less angry he must have laughed. But he stood unmoving, with a set to his body that caught Bert Kiliat's idle attention and brought him up over the paddock side to hear his father say:

. . . "And so it is not only your incessant and puerile demands, annoying though they are. We shall require you to give very good reasons for the extraordinary falling off in the returns——"

"Whew!" whistled young Kiliat, staring on the three. "I say, pater, I told you to go a bit slow with Ormond."

"Hold your tongue! Well, Mr. Ormond?"

"I can give you several reasons," said Ormond, speaking very levelly. "In the first place we have had bad weather in the hills. That breaks the race and occasions a stoppage. Twice since midwinter a flume has been washed out in a spate. Each time we were near a week mending it, for we can't work many hours in the short days. A great many of the pipes are worn out. I have to be constantly changing them for repairs. That all takes time. Then we had to run out a tail race before we could come down to work on the flat. The dredges won't allow us to deflect the creek behind them."

"The dredges can't stop you. You are on your own ground."

"That's what I told him," said Bert Kiliat. "But he wouldn't listen. Nobody listens to me."

"The wash carries down into their paddocks," said Ormond, controlling his words. "I think I have given sufficient reasons to satisfy the ordinary intelligence. If you want to know any more you can ask the men. Now, Mr. Kiliat, I have just one thing to say to you. If you were a younger man I'd have knocked you down before now. As it is, you will please take a week's notice from me dating from today. And I should advise your son to give a

little more of his time to the claim during that week. For I shall do no more work than the ordinary overseer. All orders must come from him in future."

Bert Kiliat's face was blank in the merciless light.

"Oh, I say!" he cried. "I told you so, pater! For Heaven's sake, hedge on what you've said, can't you? I don't know how to manage the beastly thing."

The elder Kiliat was giddy with rage. He faced the stern-eyed man with the stern background of black pipes and wild hills, and he said more than one thing that would not look well on paper. Unequivocally he chopped a week off Ormond's discharge, tendering coin instead. He drew out a cheque to that effect on the beating main pipe of the Lion, and Ormond tore it up. Then the chief of the directors spoke apologetically, and Bert Kiliat complained, and the elder Kiliat said several things more.

Ormond went away from it all, walking blindly. From its covered box by the Pelton wheel the telephone bell rang up from Adams, twenty-two miles away at the intake. Ormond picked up the receiver mechanically; then dropped it and sent word to Kiliat by Mears. Mears was carting over some ripples that Ormond had forged out yesterday. The sight of them made the blood boil into his head and

throat. He turned into his whare and banged the door.

Father Denis had been up the river for a christening that day. Through the morning heat his pony had crawled and sweated and loitered by each clump of bush. But it came home before a whipping wind and a rattle of thunder that shook the hills. Then the house-keeper—she was the only human being to whom Father Denis gave obedience—ordered dried clothes and a fire and warm food. So the priest turned his back on the fury of the swift night, and returned thanks for comfort.

“An’ ut’s all of a rough noight we’ll be havin’ on us, sure,” he said, with both slippers on the fender. “Bedad, I’m hopin’ as no wan will be afther choosin’ ut for dyin’ in, and want me out—now, if that is a body come cryin’ on me—begorra! Ormond, bhoy! I’m glad tu see ye. Ut is not a buryin’ or a christenin’ ye’ll be wantin’ out ov me the noight, eh?”

Ormond walked straight up to the fire, and his eyes were strange.

“I’ve left her,” he said. “I’ve left her, Father! I’ve left the Lion!”

Father Denis had loved a woman once. He loved her better now. To the best of his belief Ormond had loved the Lion instead. And Ormond would love it more dearly now the ways had parted them. Father Denis knew all this even as he came to his feet in haste.

“Bhoy, ye are soaked clane through! Will ye have some duds ov mine? No, then? Be-dad, there’s a betther tu ahl things, will ye bhut foind ut, Ormond. Sit ye down now, an’ talk ut out. Whose blame is ut, then?”

Ormond answered questions wearily and without elaboration. He sat with his elbows on his knees, propping his chin on his hands, and staring at the fire. It was a plain face at best, weather-marked and lined. But all the endurance and the alert decision were gone out of it.

“I’m tired,” he said. “Tired! Tired! There isn’t much good in anything after all. A man puts the best of himself into a thing, and—do you know what he feels like when he’s told that his best isn’t worth a tinker’s curse?”

“Ut is only a man’s own sowl can tell him that.”

“Is it? Then my soul has told me, I suppose. But Kiliat said it first.”

When a man has had seven years of his life—and near thirty years of experience before that—assessed at rather less than nothing, there are two dangers that lie under his feet. Father Denis knew and faced them both, using the straight unflinching speech that alone could meet a straight man’s needs. And the thunder cannoned round the hills, and the lightning snickered by the window as Argyle cowered under the anger of a full-waked storm.

Someone beat a mad tattoo on the knocker, followed the sound down the passage and burst into the dusky room, calling on Ormond. Ormond looked up without interest.

"Yes," he said. "What is it, Gordon?"

"Bert Kiliat says will yer come up wi' him ter the penstock? Adams 'as bin ringin' an' ringin' like he was dotty. It don't take much ter put him off his onion. Will yer come—come now? The hills will be movin' wi' water gittin' in behind them, an' he's scared fur the race. Are yer comin'?"

"No!" said Ormond. "You can tell Mr. Bert Kiliat that I have left the Lion."

"Oh, go on!" Amazement shook the last shreds of respect from Gordon. "Yer can't let the Lion go ter blazes. That rotter Kiliat's no use. Come an' tell us what ter do. Come on!"

Ormond battered a lump of coal down with his heel.

"I am not coming," he said. "You can go back and tell them that I'll see them in perdition first. Put it anyway you like. I don't care."

A silence that was rigid restraint fell between the two men when Gordon was gone. Father Denis only smoked in company. Ormond was not company to-night. He stood staring at the fire with his hands sunk deep in his pockets. Then he walked over to the

window, and leaned his forehead on the glass.

Father Denis used no more words. For it is decreed that a man must fight his battles alone and unaided. And the cruellest battle of Ormond's life was upon him in the little dark room where the tick of the clock beat off the seconds.

Down the mountain sides the rain came in eddies. A sudden lift struck out the full moon riding in wrack above the crest that gave the Lion life. Ormond watched with his lips drawn in. Then he wheeled, and came back to the still man at the fire.

"Good-night, Father. I'm off."

"Where then?"

"To get a horse that'll take me up the Changing."

"An' ye're ahl roight," said Father Denis gladly. "I knew ut, bhoy." And then Ormond was gone into the night.

In Conroy's stables, Randal loafed in the crowd that drew round the harness room door. But he skulked into the shadow as Ormond passed with quick alert speech and command. Randal had done no full day's work since the half-healed scar on his breast was raw. Yet the shame of this had not jagged him before now. Conroy's voice rumbled down between the low-lit stalls.

"Luck—nuthin'! It's the Devil's luck an'



all of it you'll want to-night, Ormond—there's the roan pony, then. He kin stand up ter it."

"Where is he? Chuck along some gear, boys."

To the steel jangle and the swift clatter of hoofs on the flags Conroy cast one injunction:

"Jes' remember that pony's worth fifty notes, Ormond. An' the Lion won't be wuth a rotten egg come mornin'."

Ormond was into the street as the stable boys's hands left the girth, and the roan pony raced with reefed rein for the bridge. Beside the abutment Ormond swung for the shingle, working up the creek and across, holding his bearings true to the foot. On the far side he struck the track that swerved ever away to the left, and gave the pony its head up the rain-battered hill.

A clear plan had shaped in his mind ere ever he crossed the leather. It gave the sense that snatched a short-handled chopper from a shelf in the mews, and that turned the pony's head to Paddy's Gully, some twelve miles below the penstock. Not Bert Kiliat nor any living man could help the race if Adams had not talked lies on the wire. Indubitably Ormond knew this. For the Lion race was of all things difficult to guard. It doubled on itself many times down the mountain; and should a slip come, the whole race must go out, swept before the torrent in the flumings be-

low. The fluming straddled swamps and little gullies and worked-out mining country. The big two-mile flume was strong. Ormond had given it all his spare time for a year past. And Paddy's Gully flume was strong, for it had been renewed in the last three months. Ormond could trust them to carry the first of the rush—the half—possibly the whole. And this meant more than his nerve dared face. It meant the swamping and buckling of the slighter fluming near the claim. It meant the choking and wrenching apart of the two miles of pipes, and the driving of them into the paddock bottom with a welter of broken jets, boxes, connections. It meant the death of the Lion.

The sleet whipped Ormond's ears; the near hills rocked and changed shape as the storm lightened and rose again. He slewed from the track to drive the roan pony into a mad little mountain river that rolled boulders at him and smelt of new-wet earth. This cut off five miles, and bruised his shin badly on a sharp rock. The rain pelted like steel knitting needles, and the pony's steady scramble flagged slightly. Here was no track, and the footway spread cruelly uncertain. But the knobs and spurs and gullies through which the Lion race took its way down the mountain drew Ormond forward, unswerving, where the windy wrack drove.

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The Big Flume dribbled suddenly on his head as he rode athwart the track nineteen feet below. He heard her roar above the growling thunder and the snap of the rain. Then he brought the pony up the gully side with hooked spurs.

"Three miles to Paddy's Gully, yet," he said, and flogged the pony across the tussock length of them.

Paddy's Gully flume received direct from the race, and it was here that Ormond must strike if he would do more than Kiliat, now riding with his men from the penstock where blind terror chased them.

The shored-up channel was running full and angry by his knee when he passed out of the tussock to the flax swamp. The end of the world cut sheer off before him, and Ormond left the saddle and slung the rein to a broom root in two movements. He dropped down, hand over hand, with the chopper buttoned inside his shirt. The floor of Paddy's Gully was riddled with fallen-in shafts, and Ormond went forward at a run, nosing among them by instinct. Every foot of the gully was trodden ground to him.

The roar of blood in his ears deadened the roar of thunder along the night. The snicker of lightning was against his cheek; and once, far behind, he heard the roan pony scream in fear. The moon swept out from the thick

black for two breaths. Through sleet like the bars of a cage Ormond saw the great hump of the Lion Mountain stripped into naked lines and sleek with streams. Below, and brought forward to the eye, a thousand rivers galloped through scrub and round bluffs; spilling sideways into the bubbling gullies, and coasting down the spurs with heads of foam. Somewhere in the midst of that hell the race was going out. Somewhere, in or below it, Bert Kiliat and a dozen more were racing for life.

“And not one of them thought of Paddy’s Gully!” said Ormond in a high fierce pride. “Not one! Oh, good God! Can’t the dark hold up? Just for ten minutes!”

Paddy’s Gully flume was under a mile in length, and the gully fell east to the river. A break in the big flume would send the whole torrent down Changing Creek. A break here would save more than the Lion.

Ormond swarmed up the flume cat-wise, and crawled out along the cross-ties. The wind plucked his hands loose more than twice, and the weight of his body as he snatched and swung took the skin from his palms. At his ear the flume was running full and steady, with no grate of boulders to jar it. The wild strange smell of flax blew up from the swamp to mix with the air that stank of sulphur and new-made mud. Ormond cast himself from tie to

tie, making sternly forward. There was no shake on the flume yet; but neither was there time for pause. When the flood struck it would give short warning.

"I'll let her have a quarter-mile," said Ormond. "If she stands up to it that won't be too much."

He came astraddle the fluming side, and used the chopper with a free arm-swing, beating, cutting and splintering the wood into wreck. He worked backwards, knocking off the top board for a space of five feet. The wind was ice to his chilled body, but the sweat dropped from him. It was such a little chance, and it meant so very much. In the beginning the water had washed round his ankle. Before the first board was off it clung cold to his shin. He talked to it in quick broken words, while the wild night raved over him, and the flume shook on its skeleton trestles, and the rivers tore downwards; flooding the broken race, choking it again with rocks, leaping over by bare bluff and spur to the bottom.

Ormond sprang into the flume, came to one knee, and beat in the lower boards savagely. The water was under his armpits. It was slobbering over the gap. It was deathly cold, and the rush of it nailed him against the side as he battered the wood, blind and desperate.

"Give me a little longer, old girl!" he cried.  
"Only a little longer, and I can do it!"

The flume shivered as though a hundred ton of rolling stock crossed it.

"By Heaven!" said Ormond; "she's struck! But she's carrying; I knew she would!" And he drove in the underwash with an insane pride that his work should be so strong.

Something splashed in the water at his shoulder. Something gripped him about the neck, bearing him down sideways. Ormond knew the man even as his clutching hands slid over him.

"Randal! For God's sake let me up! Ah-h!"

In that moment he would have killed Randal if he could. He tried, striking with the chopper, which Randal caught by the blade, wrenching it this way and that. There was no more speech. Just the roar of the night, and of the rising water and the hard-drawn breathing of the men, and the crack of straining muscles. Ormond swung free once, beating on the board joint with a strength beyond his own. But as the wood splintered Randal bore him down. And along the ways he could hear the flood coming.

There were stones in the flume now—new-torn flint that scarred them as the water power rushed it by. Ormond clung to the bottom board with the muddy, wetness round his ears.

The board gave, gaped an inch. Then the force of the water swept in behind, driving the loose board out across the flume.

Ormond was beaten back with it, under the cross-ties, with all the wrath of heaven upon him. The roar overside jolted sense from his brain, and death seemed a little thing that mattered not. For the Lion was saved—the Lion——

It was Randal who shook him into consciousness with merciless hands.

“Come off! Curse it, will you come? Ormond——”

The mechanic in Ormond told him that the water would very presently dig out the trestles, pitch them forward, and part the flume. Animal instinct brought his numbed hands groping for the cross-ties. Randal was behind him, goading him forward, hauling him up where he stumbled in the lessening flood. The flume dipped underfoot, rocked as though an earthquake had it by the muscles, fell out sideways with a crashing thunder and a screech of tearing wood that overrode the yell of the storm.

Somewhere on the edge of the wreck Randal hung, gripping Ormond. Somewhere in the black slippery staging he found foothold for both, so that they crawled forward to fall on the sand hollows and the manuka where the rain beat, and to lie there until morning was red.

When Ormond roused, stiff and weary beyond caring, he saw Randal sitting with his knees drawn up, and the sunshine harsh on his face. The lines of his face hurt Ormond to the quick. He walked across with legs that refused to carry him straightly.

"It wouldn't make any difference, Randal," he said pitifully. "Kiliat has won. You knew, didn't you?"

Randal looked out before him across the wreckage of the gully where the flood still galloped in spume.

"Kiliat had everything in the Lion," he said levelly. "If the Lion was done he was done, too. Do you think he would marry if he had to work for her? I know better than that."

Ormond's hands fell on the bowed shoulders. His palms were raw flesh, and the whole man was cramped with pain.

"Come along back, old chap," he said.

"Come along back to Father Denis. For we've both of us loved too well, Randal; and we both know the punishment for that sin."



## CHAPTER XVII

THE full light had gone from the hills, and the little whare up Chinaman's Gully was one smudge with the manuka scrub, except where a red finger of sunset marked the window blood-colour. Ormond flattened his nose on the six-by-eight window, walked round and kicked in the door. The place was blank-empty and dark; and Ormond hit his shin on a nail keg and ran foul of a something that smelt like green hide before he could make a light. A half-burnt-out slush lamp was on the ground, with the ash of last night's fire and three dirty plates. Ormond lit it and set it on the rough plank shelf. Then he reviled its splutters and smell, and blinked round.

"Suppose the old chap will come along directly," he said, and tossed that which he carried on the bunk that headed to the window.

A muddle of blankets was there already, and a gun, and a cleaning rod. Ormond sucked in his lips, reaching for the gun. He jerked open the nipple and two bullet cartridges bobbed into his palm. He held them up, frowning at them.

"Would you?" he said. "Would you? Randal, my friend, I thought there was better stuff in you than that! But—after to-night—I think I'll take charge of these—for the present, anyway."

He raked six from the blanket heap, picked up another on the floor, dropped them into his trouser pocket, and set about making a fire. A half-filled billy swung from the hook, and it suggested something. Ormond grunted and slipped his coat.

"You've washed up for me before now, Randal," he said. "Suppose it's up to me to do it for you. And—seeing that I've come to hurt you pretty severely, I'll serve you a clean feed, anyway."

He gathered greasy pannikins and dishes; tipped them into a deep meat pan, and cleared decks with a deft foot. . . . "And I think you're not taking much pride in yourself just now, old man, for you're not a pig by nature. Now where the dickens is that smelling hide?"

He went to work like a man accustomed; while the afterglow on the hills ripened to purple and claret, and sank through mouse-colour and canary to a windy black. Then the grate of pick and shovel sounded as they fell together by the door, and Randal came in, kicking the clay of the wash from his hip boots. He had grown older in the month that had brought

Effie Scannell's wedding very near, and a dull reserve had grown on him.

"Thought the place was on fire," he said, pulling the door to against the wind.

Ormond turned from the tins where he had been tasting the difference between Navy-cut and tea.

"Just been getting a surprise party ready for you, Randal. Tea, eh? The billy is boiling its head off."

"No, thanks." Randal slung his kit in a corner and rubbed his hands over his forehead. "What is it, Ormond?"

"I—have brought them. You—you're going to stand up to it all right, Randal? Yes—in the bunk."

Randal lifted the little shapeless packet.

"This?"

"Yes." Ormond laid a hand on the other man's arm. "Old fellow—have something to eat first. You're clean played out."

Randal took his knife, and slashed through the tightly bound string with fierce upward cuts. Ormond understood that the trouble was for now, and he moved into the shadow with his head among the cross-ties.

"But you don't need a knife, Randal," he muttered. "Granny knots, I'll bet my shirt! When did a girl ever tie anything else?"

Randal's fingers were stiff. The slim shovel handle cramped more than the reins of the past

years. But he tore the paper away, and shook the things out on the two-plank table. They were very ordinary things. Seven letters in Randal's straggling writing; a bunch of dried cotton flowers and daisies gathered on the Brothers last mustering season; a chipped Maori axe found at the head of the river (he had carried it in his shirt for safety and it had rubbed a raw wound before he could give it to her), and one or two birthday and Christmas cards, with no more than the name "Effie" on them in his handwriting. Randal touched them softly with his fingertips, and Ormond looked steadfastly on the crumbling sod wall hung with the miner's things that were so familiar.

In the dead silence the talk of little flames in the chimney piece was eager and cruelly distinct. They called for food. Ormond heard them. Then Randal passed him with a long swift step, cast a double handful of the stuff on the red, and ground it in with his heel. Ormond waited while the cotton-flower ash spun up into the night with the paper, while the green flint axe settled, strong and unflaking, into the heart of the fire. Then he came across and put a hand on the bowed shoulders. He had learned to know Randal since the night Death missed them both on the Lion.

Randal twisted away from him.

"See the axe?" he said. "We can't turn everything into smoke and lies—though we try. Well—I've done it! You can go back and tell her I've done it!"

"You have only done half," said Ormond, meeting his eyes straightly. "And you've got to do the other half now. That was what she asked, wasn't it? And you gave your word. Has that gone? For if so you've lost everything, Randal."

"No," said Randal, "I remember." He turned to the locker at the bunkfoot, and Ormond's keen eyes grew graver. When a horse will not rouse to the whip the chances are that the girth-gall sore is sapping him.

From the locker bottom Randal brought out an old writing case worked in coloured silks by a mother or a sister whom he had never spoken of. It was burst at the sides and frayed from constant handling. Ormond knew that it held the core of Randal's life, and, at that moment, he hated Effie Scannell.

"Shall I—go outside, Randal?"

"No! I don't care—chuck some more fat into that slushlight."

There was that in his face which made Ormond try again.

"Dump 'em all in together, man. There's no sense in twisting the knife."

But Randal did not hear. He stood by the slushlight, where a lump of meat swam in the

unstrained fat, smelling vilely. The billy spat and dribbled on its hook, and the throb of the flames cast the stern dark face in alternate light and shadow. He shook the things out on the table. Letters, and again letters—tied with ribbon, with string and with bootlace. A painted tobacco pouch wrapped in tissue paper, and scented with lavender water; and other foolish little things such as a girl might give to the man she loves.

Ormond turned his eyes away.

“Best be getting on with it, old chap,” he said softly.

Randal straightened and his words came with a rush.

“What’s the sense of burning them? D’you think I can forget what she’s said—here? D’you think I can ever forget what she has said? D’you think there’s any fire burns hot enough for that? There isn’t! I’ve been into hell to look for it——”

“Steady, old man! Steady! Randal—Randal—oh, I am sorry!”

“D—— your sorrow! I don’t want it! Did she say she was sorry, too? Did she send me a pretty proper little message to take the place of—these?”

He swept up a handful and slung them on the fire.

“What the devil right have you to be sorry? You loved the Lion, and you can go back to

her. Both the Kiliats are praying you on their knees to go back to her. But I——”

Ormond's words struck with all the force at his command:

“And do you know why I can go back to her? It's because I've held myself clean and fit to serve her all these years! It's because I've never messed away my life and gone downhill, without the courage or the determination to pull in. You're a strong man, Randal! Father Denis told you that; and you're young yet. How dare you ruin the only life you've got! Go away and make something of it—something worthy of such a man as you would be! Oh, Randal! you are a slinking coward, and that's the best and the worst word of you.”

“If you were any other man,” said Randal, “I think I'd kill you for that! But I don't suppose it would be worth it. Nothing is worth anything much. Love and hate, and all the other things a man lives for—they're all rotten.”

He untied a blue ribbon that Effie's fingers had tied, and shook the letters on the fire, watching with unmoving eyes as they unrolled and shivered into tinder. Ormond went back to the dark corner. These tongues of flame held Randal's ear to-night.

The wind was muttering very restlessly in the tussock. The back log of totara fell in

half and jammed the tobacco pouch. Randal freed it with his foot. An envelope atop of all curled open, baring a quarter-plate photograph, disgracefully toned by an amateur. Randal dived after it with an oath, and the hair was singed from his hand and arm in the saving of it.

“Chuck that back!” said Ormond.

Randal cradled the indistinct little picture in both hands. There was just the dainty pose of the head and the sweet droop of the lip to show.

“She need never know—just this one thing, Ormond.”

“No! You’ve honour enough to carry you through this business properly, haven’t you? And you have no right to that of all things, Randal. You come of the breed that dies in its boots, and if anyone found that on you——”

“I have a right to it! She gave it to me! And I have a right to her—to her! She gave herself to me long ago——”

Ormond secured the photograph with a dexterous twist, and spun it into the flame.

“You’re talking piffle,” he said, “and worse. Stand up to it, can’t you? And remember that she is to be married in a week, while you”—Ormond grew suddenly angry—“you’ll go down into the gutter and lie there, I suppose! You’ve just about enough sense! Oh, Randal,



Randal! you silly old fool! why don't you punch my head? It would do you heaps of good!"

Randal did not answer. Ormond knew that he did not hear. He stared down into the fire until Ormond covered it with the frying pan, dropping a cartridge from his pocket as he stooped. Randal picked it up. Then he went over to the bunk and snapped open the breech of his gun. Lastly, he looked at Ormond and grinned. It was not a nice grin.

"Thanks," he said. "You're very considerate, Ormond. But don't you think I'd have done it long ago if I'd meant to take that way?"

"I don't know," said Ormond; "for you do not know yourself, Randal."

Randal slid his hand into his side pocket; pulled out some cartridges and reloaded in two movements.

"Wait a minute," he said to the face showing faintly in the smoky shadows. "I want to ask you something." His voice shook and thickened. "If you can tell me that she—has not forgotten, I'll wait till the end of time to help her if she wants me. If you can't—I'll blaze out my own track, and it's no business of yours or of any other man's. Well? Tell me, can't you? You know, for you have seen her. She gave you the things."

"You have no longer any right to think of her at all——"

"Tell me, will you?"

Ormond knew this Randal well enough. He would kill if he did not get his answer. By all a man's knowledge of man Ormond feared the effect of either lie or truth. Then, for the first time, he chose a lie:

"She has forgotten," he said slowly.

Randal stretched up, and laid the gun in its slings. When he turned again his face was blank as a slate with its troublesome lesson wiped off.

"That is all, then," he said. "The thing is out of your hands now. You understand?"

Ormond moved to the door; but it was flung wide in his face, and something ran past him, swift and light, with sobbing breath and broken laughing words.

"Guy! Guy! I've come back! I've come back to you! Oh—Guy——"

From the door Ormond saw the flushed wet dimpling face and the wonderful new light in the eyes. He saw Randal, and went out, closing the door. Then Randal spoke, unmoving.

"Kiliat?" he said.

Effie Scannell tore a ring from her finger and sent the opal spark to meet the green axe lying heavy in the fire heart.

"And that is all there is of Mr. Kiliat!" she cried. "I have told him so! I knew it when

your letters went away. Oh—surely I have known it always, though I didn't understand. Oh, Guy! there was only you for me and me for you since God made us. Guy—my own dear one!”

“No!” said Randal. “I can't; I am not worthy!”

She came to him, standing with her hands linked, and her grave dark eyes on his.

“You have no choice, Guy,” she said simply. “And I have not any, either. I have been a child always. Now I am a woman, for I know what love means. It is very terrible, Guy, and it frightens me, because it has taken everything out of the earth but God and you. Guy—help me! For love is too big for a girl to bear it by herself!”

Her voice broke, and her hands came over her face. And, by the loss of the child-frankness of old, Randal understood. Effie had come into her woman's heritage that was to be his also.

## CHAPTER XVIII

"I AIN'T goin' ter hev no contagious best man," said Danny, stolidly. "The boys'll most on 'em be down ter see us spliced; but I don't want 'em hoppin' round wi' me. We got the stage ter ourselves on Wednesday, Suse."

Suse slid her arm round his neck. For twilight was over the bridge spanning Changing Creek, and there were none but the red-eyed dredges upstream to see.

"I don't care about all the boys," she said. "But Maiden is to be bridesmaid, an' so Steve must be best man, Danny."

"She'd sooner hev Lou, I guess, old lady. They've bin pretty thick lately."

Suse pulled the carefully twisted curl on his forehead.

"I was beginnin' ter think as I'd taught you somethin', lad," she said, "but you got a good long way to go 'fore you pick up the common sense as a gel has by nature."

"Then I'll pick up an armful now, while I got the chanst! But, Suse—Randal an' Miss Effie didn't hev no best man or no bridesmaid."

Suse twisted a little in his hold and kissed him.

“That weren’t quite the same, you dear ole chump. An’ you’ll ask Steve ter-morrow, Danny?”

“We-ell,” said Danny, resignedly; and then puckered his forehead as a slim boy shape ran past them in the dusk.

“Roddy Duncan,” said Suse, flushing. “Take yer arm away, Danny! I——”

“What’s the odds? He’s gone now, anyways. An’ runnin’ like ole Nick were arter him, too.”

There was that in Roddy’s face confirmed Danny’s words. He was white-lipped, and a desperate terror sat in the back of his eyes. He ran fleetly with his head down, breasting the tussock hill, swinging to the right, and taking the little winding sheep track that led the way to Pipi Wepeha’s whare. The cabbage trees were moaning in the evening wind, and the brushing flax at his feet seemed to whisper words, tossing them on the night. Pipi’s whare was dark and very silent where it sat by the track, and Roddy pulled up, shaking with something that was not exhaustion.

Any man can overcome fear of all that may be put into bald words—that may be set down clear to the understanding. But that fear which is elusive, intangible; which belongs only to the winds and the untrod earth and the wide

night with its throbbing stars, holds the soul in a dread that cannot be crushed down, because it cannot be explained. That dread had been with Roddy since Murray spoke to Ormond on the Lion hilltop. Six times he had held his courage between his teeth and taken the track to Pipi's whare. Six times it had failed him, and sent him back. Last night he had crept to the window and watched Pipi a half-hour by the fire blaze. This night Pipi had gone to the township, and Roddy had come up in the added knowledge gained by that watching.

Slowly he pushed the door open. It creaked, and a smell of rancid fish came out. Roddy struck a match, and went in and dropped the latch behind him. The whare was low and very dirty. It sloped from a ridge pole, and roof and sides were of split twisted flax and raupo. Pipi's sleeping mat lay by the fireplace which he had built of kerosene tins, and a carved Maori head with a greenstone tiki slung round the neck stood on a pole. Round the forehead where the tattoo lines were set in spirals was bound Murray's red necktie.

Roddy stood still and looked at it. To tear the thing off and run away home with it seemed simple utterly—when the township lights and noise were round him. But the lonely Fighting Hill with its traditions of blood and hate; the rub of the flax leaves without the door; the

unexplainable sense of living and seeing that crowded the dark silent whare, knit a power too strong for the sensitive boy. Roddy's match went out, burning his fingers, and in the blackness something surely breathed. The sweat was wet on his face as he made another spurt of flame to flare over the grinning tiki that writhed its limbs with the shake of the match.

"I—must do it!" said Roddy in his throat. "I must—I must!"

He pulled the red faded necktie away from the wood, stuffed it in his breast pocket, brought out another—chosen from the same stock at Derrett's shop, and worn to shabbiness—in haste, and twisted it on the head in place of the first. Then he trod the match underfoot, and groped for the door.

It pushed open suddenly, shutting him behind it, and someone came in with heavy steps. Roddy's breath died in his throat, and from the raupo walls behind hands were surely stretching to hold him. He could feel the man searching, silently, yet with system and determination. All that Lou had told him of the tohunga power; all that the night had taught him of mystery chilled his heart and held him motionless. The moving hands came nearer. Roddy knew that they would presently touch his face. And the spirits of horror and of evil were about him when a hand

brushed his cheek, slid to his shoulder and clenched there.

Then came the crackle of a match up a trouser leg, and the hold loosed on the boy as Murray said:

“Roddy! You young imp! What the devil are you doing here?”

“Murray—Murray—Murray!” Roddy held him tight. “I thought you was Pipi——”

“Pipi is down in the township. I saw him as I was going over to Cardigan’s. That is why I was certain I was after a burglar when I spotted the light up here. And I’m not sure that I wasn’t right, either, Roddy.”

“You—got pluck ter come up here,” said Roddy, very low.

Murray laughed shortly.

“There’s very much in the world that we don’t understand, Roddy. But we can fight it, all the same. Evil is a tangible thing, in whatever form it comes—tangible enough to stand up to, anyway.”

“But you believe that Pipi—that Pipi——”

Murray turned, lighting a tallow dip that stood within three nails on a board.

“I was dog-tired that night Pipi started his yarns,” he said, “and I was afraid—I was dead afraid that he might do some foolery. That’s what gave him the hold, do you see? You take my tip, Roddy: When a fellow begins to funk, morally or physically, he is bound to



fall in somehow. He's melting the wax for anything to cast the impression on. It's a thing that is done more often than you know—in one way or another. But if you've got pluck enough to stand the fire that will melt the wax again you lose the impression, Roddy."

"I—don't think I quite understand," said Roddy.

"I don't think you understand at all. Never mind. Just remember that neither Pipi nor the Devil himself can get hold of you unless you let him—by Jove!"

Movement had brought him before the carved head with the necktie bound on the forehead. A new sternness came over the thin face with the deep eyes.

"I'm not sure that you don't deserve smacking, you immoral young imp!" he said. Then he whipped the rag off, and tore it in half with a twist such as is used to wring a chicken's neck.

"Don't!" cried Roddy. "Oh, I tried so hard to make it like! Oh, Murray!"

"Well, I'll be hanged!" said Murray, and took him by the shoulders. "Do you want me to leave it there for the old brute to curse over?"

"It's not yours. This is yours." Roddy drew it out and Murray stared.

"Whose is this, then?"

"Mine! I—I came to put it there."

Murray was silent a minute—a long minute. Then he said:

“Give it to me. Now, you just come along home, young ’un. And please to understand that the power of evil isn’t the greatest power in the world. You’re proof positive to the contrary, if you only knew it.”

“But—if Pipi curses you still—if he gets something else?” whispered Roddy out in the starlight, where the tussocks of Fighting Hill muttered round their feet.

Murray tucked the boy’s cold hand close to the warmth of his own body and trudged forward.

“Roddy,” he said, “we’re all of us ready to remember that there is a Devil. Sometimes we are so busy remembering it that we forget that there is a God. If we inverted our beliefs occasionally we’d get along better. I don’t understand this, and I never shall, I think. It’s sweated a good deal of nerve out of me. But I’ve stuck my toes up against something at last, and I’m not going out on the undertow any more.”

“W-what is it?” whispered Roddy.

“You young ass!” said Murray, looking away to the stars. “Haven’t I just told you?”

## CHAPTER XIX

"WELL, dear, it doesn't really matter. It's only till to-morrow."

"But it's a brutally rough place, Effie. I don't like your being here at all, little girl."

Randal drew the flimsy window curtains together, pinned them, and came across to the horsehair sofa.

"We'll shut out what we can," he said. "And that's not much, I'm afraid. All these confounded township hotels are just a bar and a lean-to and a drunken row—'specially in this part of Queensland."

Effie pinched his cheek with soft fingers.

"Let's pretend we don't hear it. We used to be so good at pretending. And now there isn't any make-believe left——"

"Too much solid fact, eh?" demanded Randal, dropping on one knee to bring his face close beside hers on the cushion.

"Too much solid happiness," she said softly.

"You are sure of that, Effie? Oh, are you sure? I have taken you away from so much. Remember that there will be hard work on

the station when we get out to it. Hard work and loneliness. And there's a good deal of the sinner left in me yet, Effie. I have hurt you more than once already. I shall do it again. And yet—you know—I could kill myself for being such a brute—to you——”

“Oh, silly boy! I am content with you—just as you are. And—you are content with me, Guy?”

“Shan't tell you, little Madame Vanity. Effie, I think I'll go out and see what those fellows are doing. The Chows are on to some poor beggar, I'm afraid.”

“Guy—you'll be careful? They sound—it's like angry dogs snarling!”

“So it is! I'll just go out and find what bone they're after. It's all right, dear. I can take care of myself.”

The wide, unmade street was breathless with the heat and the dust of an afternoon sun. It was wild with sound, and with the reek of spirits, and the crowding of half-drunken men. Boobyalla had been a notable mining township once. Now the strong souls had gone; and Chinamen and the riff-raff that they bring with them swarmed on the mullock heaps and the wornout claims, and made the little township more hideous than of old.

Randal stepped from the verandah upon a yellow group beating tom-toms; swerved from it, and asked questions of a drover leaning

against the half door. The drover spat a chewed straw from his mouth and grinned.

"Jes' lookin' roun' fur suthin' ter worry," he said. "It's a common enough caper when they've been doin' 'emselves pretty well. P'raps they'll quiet down; p'raps they'll hev knives goin' direckly. We jes' keeps our eyes skinned—but it's best ter light out ef they gits nasty."

There were some white men in the shouting half-maddened crush. Randal's glance dropped on a little thin face under a big-brimmed hat hung round with bobbing corks, and he started.

"Know who that little chap is?" he demanded. "The fellow with the corks to keep the flies off. New to the country, eh?"

"You'll be wearin' them yerself nex' month—what chap? No—dun't know his name. He's slabbin' in with the Chows. A rotter, by the look o' him."

Randal agreed without hesitation. For the little man was Jimmie Blaine.

Jimmie wore union shirting and dirty corduroys. He was unkempt, and the shifty lines on his face had deepened. Moreover, the side-long look in his small eyes told of a dogging fear. He stood with hands thrust in his pockets on the rim of the crowd, and Randal shrugged his shoulders.

"You're scum even of that lot, my friend

Jimmie," he murmured; and then a man pushed up from behind, and caught Jimmie by the arm.

He was a big man, and the swag on his back had not bowed him, nor cramped the free swing of his limbs. Something in the carriage of his head was familiar to Randal. Then the face showed as Jimmie wrenched himself free.

"Ted Douglas!" said Randal in amaze. "Ted Douglas, by all that's crazy! Ted—oh, you fool! You silly fool! Did you think he was going to be worth the finding?"

For one moment the pure joy of Ted's face shone in the sunlight. Then Jimmie broke from him, screaming in frenzy. Ted sprang after. And then words came to Randal which brought him across the street to struggle through the heated massed bodies.

"Thief!" yelled Jimmie. "Murderer! Thief! He'll kill me! Catch him!"

The howl in answer put fear into Randal for a breath. The yellow faces took on another look; and somewhere, flashing across Randal's sight came the glint of a knife. He heard the drover shout warning from the verandah, and he put his head down and beat his way toward Ted. Then remembrance of Effie caught him and sickened him, and he would have slung free of them all but that there was no longer any choice left. The mur-

derous-working faces were close, pressing forward; and he ran with them, shouting:

“Get the little one! The little one! He’s gamming you! He’s the thief!”

Despite himself he chuckled at the yell that followed.

“Jimmie’s going to pay,” he said. “The little devil! He’ll pay when they get him!”

In the red of the low sun he saw Jimmie run up the street. He saw Ted Douglas burst out through the press, flinging the men behind, and heard the cry as of old:

“Jimmie! It’s all right! I’ll take care on yer, lad! Come back—Jimmie!”

A foot tripped Randal. He fell, jaggging his temple against a broken boarding; and when sense and movement came back the quick twilight had settled to night, and the noise came fitfully, blown in gusts from the hotel bars.

He went down the emptied street slowly; met the drover at the corner, and sent him back with word to Effie. Then he turned into the first hotel and asked news of Ted Douglas and Jimmie. Six men told him, while the seventh bound his forehead skilfully. “. . . An’ it’s well there weren’t more murder done,” they said. “For them Chows is all on fur a bun-worry o’ sorts. It ain’t all over yet, perhaps. But the little one won’t do no more interferin’.”

"And the other?" asked Randal.

"Don't know. He weren't talkin' o' hisself—yes, they're in there."

It was a dirty little wattle-and-daub shanty set back in the dust of a section; and the power which had swept the rioters away from it, leaving it still and silent to the two, was the Shadow of Death. Randal went in, shutting the door on the curious stretched faces. The light of a tallow dip blinded his eyes after the soft glow. Then he walked over to the far end of the shanty.

There were two voices there. One muttering, sobbing, blaspheming in utter terror; the other low and tender and patient. Randal spoke:

"Ted," he said; "Ted Douglas. It's only Randal. Are you hurt?"

"Randal—oh, Randal! good enough! Tell Jimmie as I never come meanin' ter git him run in. Tell him as he kin trust me still—tell him, Randal!"

Randal dropped on one knee by the thing that moaned and writhed.

"You needn't judge Ted by yourself, you little brute," he said roughly. "I can swear to it that Ted's never felt anything but love for you—though what makes him such a blamed fool is more than I can tell you."

Jimmie's breath laboured and fluttered. He twisted weak fingers in Randal's cuff.



"He don't mean it!" he gasped. "He don't! He's lyin'! Where's a priest fur ter confess ter? He'd let me die wi'out it! Father Denis said as there was blood on me!" His voice thinned and rose, making Randal thrill with the terror of it. "He's keepin' me here ter die an' be damned! Randal——"

Randal looked over at Ted in the dim light.

"There ain't a priest in the township," said Ted, briefly. "I bin askin'."

"And a doctor?"

"He's jes' gone. Can't do nothin'. Chest's crushed in."

There was a quiver over the strong tender face, and Ted bent down again.

"Jimmie—dear old lad—ef yer'd let me holt yer up a bit, p'raps——"

"Let me be! Let me be, you——! Ah-h!"

Then all the agony of an unforgiven soul leapt upon Jimmie, and the two watched, sick and shaken and helpless, save that Ted's heart knelt in him with prayer. A truth told Randal long years back came to him suddenly.

"Jimmie, the rule of your Church says that when there is no priest one man can confess to another, and receive absolution from him. **That's** true, I know. So if that is what you are afraid of——"

Jimmie lay still, fighting for breath.

"Do you mean it?" he said slowly.

“On my soul!”

“Then, Randal—yer knows I stole that cash an’ sunk it all in minin’. An’—I wanted Ted killed jes’ now ’cause he would ’a’ given me up. An’ tell me God will furgive me fur all that.”

There was blood on Ted’s lip where he bit it, and his strong hands were working. Even in this hour Jimmie had no forgiveness for that day on the Mains cattle camp.

Randal was kneeling upright, and his face was dark. There was nothing in him but disgust, and a righteous anger. The heavy pressing dark of the shanty; the drunken shouts up the street, and the plop-plop of the guttering candle flame filled up the measure of squalid dread.

“I—can’t,” said Randal, briefly. “Before God I’d be lying if I told you that I thought you deserved forgiveness, Jimmie.”

Ted stopped with a little cry, pitiful as a mother’s.

“Jimmie—Jimmie, lad. Will yer take it from me? Oh, Jimmie, dear old chap! D’yer think as anythin’ cud change me, Jimmie?”

“Yer can’t!” cried Jimmie. “Yer dun’t know! I never run when Murray tolt me ’bout Buggy, fur I saw as I cud get yer inter trouble. I knew as yer’d take it ’fore yer put it onter me—an’ yer did. But I funked wi’ the boys—now yer know—git out!”

“I knowed that long ago. I knowed yer’d

not any love fur me, now, lad. But if I loves yer jes' the same, Jimmie——”

“Yer can't!”

“Jim, d'yer remember when we wus jes' little chaps——”

Randal turned away from the murmur as Ted's head went down on the bag pillow beside Jimmie's. He walked to the window, looking out on the open bar across the street. It was foul with drunken laughter and noise of quarrelling, and vivid with the gleam of angry white faces mixed with the yellow. Beyond lay God's own stars on the peaceful breast of Heaven, and behind a soul was struggling to bridge the gulf between.

Then Ted called sharply. Randal came with swiftmess, and did all that he could. But Jimmie's arm was hooked round Ted's neck, and nothing would loose it until the end came. Then it was Randal who laid him back on the bags.

“You did more for him than any priest could have done, Ted,” he said. “Now you'll let me patch up that side of yours. D'you think I didn't see blood on your shirt?”

Ted did not hear. He went through all that was necessary with unshaking hands. Then he stood up.

“It's nothing but a scratch,” he said. “Good-night, Randal, and thank yer. I'm goin' ter stay wi' him.”

Randal looked round the smelling, dirty shanty where the nine-inch draught space between wall and ceiling let in the red dust of the street, and he looked down on the little mean face in the quivering candle light.

"Don't, Ted!" he said. "We can lock the place up. Come round to my——"

Ted shook his head.

"He were always that nervous," he said. "I—I'd ruther stay wi' him ter-night. Per'aps—if I'd done differently that day on Black Hill yards——"

"You could not have done differently," said Randal. "And you know it. Now you will go back to Mains, and——"

"No!" Ted's eyes were fixed on the still thing by his foot. "No! Never Mains an' the township agin wi'out Jimmie—now. I loved him too dear fur that!"

"Then will you come out West with me?" said Randal.

"I don't know. I don't know nothin' ter-night, I think. I'll see yer ter-morrow. If yer'd jes' go, Randal——"

Then Randal went back. And Effie scolded him, and cried and laughed at the set of the bandage round his head; and crept into his arms as they sat in the little dark parlour where the horsehair sofa and the dust made by the white ants did not show in the light that was given by the wide stars only.

"Who was it spoke of the 'Wine of Life'?" she said. "Do you think he meant love, Guy?"

"I know he did," said Randal. Then he held her closely. "Effie—Effie—I thought that our love was the greatest thing in the world. But it isn't! It isn't! I've seen a greater to-night, little girl. It was a beautiful thing, and—very terrible, dear."

She pulled down his face and kissed him.

"All love is beautiful and terrible," she said. "But we have worked out the terrible part of ours, Guy."

And Randal's lips met hers for answer.

## CHAPTER XX

BLAKE'S hotel was upside down and inside out. For all the boys from Mains and from Behar were down to do honour to Danny's wedding: and up and along the passages; in the kitchen and the bar, violins were tuning and stray voices whistling the "Bride's March." On the side-path a dozen beat step, with gusts of talk and laughter blown out with the tobacco wreaths.

Moody sat on the horse trough, dabbing his forehead with a red handkerchief. For the tenth time he had dragged Tod over the Town Hall floor on a sack, and, by Tod's sworn word, "There was not a bhoy in Argyle wud stand up on ut the night, wid the shine of ut."

"On'y Dennis," said Ike, strong in the pride of his new black flannel shirt and a white tie. "He's havin' ter dance in socks, yer knows."

Dennis was Danny's elder brother, and unmarried, and the punishment thereof was an ancient law in the township.

"Sure, then, who wud be lookin' at Dinnis the night?" cried Tod. "An' here comes hersilf

wid the gossoon! Will ye stand by wid the rice, then?"

Rice had lain thick from the church gates to the hotel door these four hours past. But the boys' pockets bulged with it yet; and their fists were shut on it, and the air sung with the grains as a girl ran out, flinging up a white muslin arm as shield. Lou followed, with his light gay laughter.

"Hit the wrong nail this time, you chaps," he cried. "Danny and Suse have gone out the back way. Come on, Maiden!"

In the light from the bar Maiden's delicate face was flushed above the snow-white of her dress. She stood an instant, half hesitating among the men; her soft hair turned to gold about her head, and her hand clinging to Lou's. Excitement was throbbing in the very air of the township, and something in her wild-rose beauty tingled the men. Then Mogger lit the spark:

"Three cheers fur the nex' bride!" he shouted.

The roar startled Danny and Suse where they hurried by a little side street to the Town Hall, and Lou swung off his cap with daring assurance.

"Thank you, boys!" he cried. "Make way there! Maiden, here's your shawl."

He flung a soft white thing over her hair, and the blank dark beyond the dazzle of light

took them. Tod rubbed the grains of rice from his damp hands.

"Begorra, bhoys, we'd betther be movin'," he said. "Wud ye let Lou be havin' it all tu himsilf down there?"

Steve followed slowly in the wake of eager feet. Four hours ago he had stood up in the church very near to Maiden and had heard the great words whereby Danny and Suse had pledged themselves. But he had looked at none but Maiden, so that Danny might be forgiven for calling him a "silly rotter" when he forgot to hand over the ring, and finally dropped it under the front seat where Lou sat. Lou had picked it up, with a little suggestive movement, and his bold eyes full on Maiden's. And Maiden had grown red and white, and spoken no word at all to Steve when he took her out of the church, trying to tell her that he envied, not Danny, but Danny's state, and so mixing himself that Maiden's wicked laughter called up Lou. It was since that moment that Steve had been giddy with fear and hate. For over-well he knew Lou Birot.

There were cut cabbage trees about the Town Hall, and tall sweet-scented koradis, and little dark corners where Tod had planted chairs. Tod was M.C.; and there were three violins and an accordeon and a long tableful of supper on the platform. Danny was utterly



delirious with glee; and when he kissed the bridesmaid in the quadrilles it was Lou called shame on Steve that he had foregone his right with Suse. Steve hung glowering in a corner, and the Packer cried:

“Do it yerself, Lou, yer beggar!”

Lou’s bold glancing eyes met Maiden’s.

“The next best thing, Maiden,” he said underbreath; and kissed Suse on both hard red cheeks, slid his arm round her waist, and whirled her down the room.

Steve came across to Maiden.

“Are you sparin’ any dances ter-night, Maiden?” he said shortly.

The crimson Lou’s words had called there left Maiden’s face. She flung up her head.

“You’ve been in sech a mighty hurry to ask me,” she said.

“No, I ain’t. I near didn’t ask yer at all. But yer’ll spare me one now, Maiden, fur I’ve suthin’ ter say ter yer?”

Maiden turned on her heel.

“Thanks! I don’t want ter hear it,” she said.

“Would yer ruther I said it ter Lou?”

Maiden glanced at him in sudden fear; at his broad honest face set now in a savageness that Lou had seen there before; at his great height and solid breadth as against Lou’s lithe gracefulness. She shivered a little. Then she put her hand on his arm.

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"You can have this," she said. "It's Ike's, but he don't count."

Steve pushed open a side-door with his elbow.

"It's hot 'nuff out here," he said. "No—there ain't any dew on the grass. Come down ter the gate, Maiden."

Maiden stepped beside him, holding her muslin dress daintily. The rollicking music behind unsteadied Steve's nerves. There was a lilt of defiance in it that brought Lou's laughter very near. He gripped his hand on the gate.

"Are yer thinkin' o' marryin' Lou?" he demanded suddenly.

Maiden brushed a twig from her skirt.

"You said you wanted to tell *me* something," she suggested. "Don't yer think yer ideas is a bit upside down, Steve?"

"I'd ruther not tell yer till I knows that."

"Well," said Maiden, lightly, "you're not goin' to know that. Anything else?"

"If yer sends me ter him, Maiden——"

"What will you do?"

"I'll git the truth outen him." Steve's voice had a rasp in it now.

"And what good will that do you?"

The distant curve of tussock hills against the stars blurred in Steve's sight.

"D'yer think I'm carin' fur myself?" he said fiercely. "If Lou were another man I'd say nothin'. But him bein' what he is—Maiden!

Maiden! yer don't know him, dearie. Not as I knows him!"

"Likely 'nuff. You're a bit clumsy at know-in' anybody."

"If you're carin' fur Lou——" Steve stopped, cutting his nails into the gate top.

"Well?"

"Maiden—if yer'd tell me! Oh, if yer'd only tell me! Maiden——"

Maiden yawned deliberately.

"Must be 'bout eleven, I should think," she said. "We've bin out here an hour, haven't we? Lou was goin' to take me in to supper."

"Maiden—if yer expectin' Lou ter marry yer—he never will. He'll like as not be clearin' out any day at all."

Maiden drew up her slim throat, and her words came iced:

"I don't remember givin' you the right ter be impertinent to me, Steve Derral," she said.

"I ain't askin' no right. I'm jes' warnin' yer——"

"I've heard folks say as yer ain't always clever wi' the words you use. Insultin' is more like it, I think."

"He'll insult yer worse ef you're engaged ter him 'fore he goes. Maiden—yer got ter listen——"

"Lou! Lou! Come!"

A dark bulk by the steps moved suddenly. Then Lou's voice was in Steve's ear:

"Hands off there, will you?"

Steve did not loose his hold on her arm.

"I'm not takin' orders from you," he said. "Maiden, it's your choice, now. Are yer chuckin' him or me, Maiden?"

His voice was rough with pain, and all the love that would ever be his was in his eyes. Maiden looked on the two in the moonlight. Then she laughed.

"I'm goin' into the dressin'-room to tidy my hair. So I don't want either of yer. Let go, Steve! P'raps that's my choice, and p'raps it isn't."

Steve turned on the man when she had left them.

"'Twouldn't mean much ter me ter be hung s'posin' yer was thinkin' o' breakin' her heart," he said. "Yer'd be wise ter remember that. Fur, sure's death, I'll never let her marry yer, an' me livin'."

Lou's hands were thrust deep in his pockets, and there was a slow smile on his mouth.

"I don't fancy you're going to have much say in the matter, if you ask me," he said. "I've got her name down four times more to-night. Can you beat that?"

Steve's programme was a bit of blank white paper. He tore it in half and flung it on the gravel.

"I ain't goin' ter say anythin' more ter her." He paid out his words separately. "It's you

ter reckon wi' nex' time. An' yer'd best jes' remember—she means a lump more ter me than my life."

He went out of the gate abruptly and up the street, meeting with Murray and Father Denis at the corner. Murray called gaily:

"Going for the kerosene-tins, Steve?"

"We got 'em," said Steve, halting. "Fifteen, an' heavy sticks. It's goin' ter be the biggest tin-kettlin' in the township; both parties being sech fav'rits, yer see."

"Well, I don't want to have to run any of you in if I can help it——"

"Bhut there is his duty comes furrst, he wud say, bhoy—what is it, Ormond?"

Ormond was breathless. He had a coat over his pyjamas, and unlaced boots on his bare feet: for he had come at the run from his bed in the little tin hut behind the Lion that had proven too strong for his wrath against Kiliat. He was white-faced in the moonlight, and his words were tumbled.

"Roddy has shot Art Scannell. Kiliat sacked him last week, and he's been swearing to pay Kiliat out. I saw him with a gun this morning. He nicked the wrong man—I found him crying over Art. And now he's off after Kiliat. I tried to get him, Murray——"

Murray's clean-shaped ruddy face was suddenly drawn.

"Is Art dead?"

"Think so; pretty far gone, anyway. But Murray—if he finds Kiliat——"

"Steve, you hop down to the hall and rope in a few fellows. Don't spread an alarm. Where was he going, Ormond?"

"Kiliat is up at Scannell's to-night. Roddy was taking a short cut through the bush——"

"Come and get into some of my duds while I rake out a couple of shooters. Father Denis, you'll take somebody up to Art. He is—where, Ormond? Oh, in Ormond's hut, Father Denis."

In Murray's room Ormond spoke with some hesitation:

"It's tough work for you, Murray, old fellow."

Murray was loading his revolvers with quick firm movements.

"That little chap faced what he feared more than death to save me. And I've got to bring him to the gallows, perhaps. Pipi's at the bottom of it in some way, Ormond. Roddy has never been the same since that foolery."

"You've got over it."

Murray buckled his belt, and wheeled to the head of the stairs.

"He may be paying instead of me," he said, very low. "I don't know. Come on, Ormond."

Where a crowd foregathered in the dark street Murray took command, leading out to the river track and the heavy bush on the hills,

Behind was music and the blushing laughter of girls, and a new-made bride; before lay death for themselves from an unseen bullet, or death for the boy who was already a murderer.

Not Maiden nor another woman could hold Lou when danger beckoned. Murray heard his careless jokes, and the sputter of laughter waked by them in the night, and his forehead went hot with sudden wrath.

"He's the only one going for the fun of it," he muttered to Ormond. "And, by Heaven! if he hurts the poor little beggar I'll put a bullet into him myself." Then he sent his voice out in command: "There's to be no rough handling! Remember that, men! The boy's off his head, and I won't have him messed with."

There was a growl out of the dark.

"That's all very fine, Murray. How if 'e goes plunkin' lead inter us, eh?"

On the breast of the hill the bush was heavy, and vines tripped them, slashing faces with their thorns, or whipping back with the smarting sting of a supple-jack. The track Roddy had taken lay higher, among the delicate red birches and the straight-limbed matais; and the men climbed for it in haste, for they loved Scannell well, and more than one life was in danger this night.

The underway was rotten with long-fallen boles where the golden and scarlet mosses

grew. It was bogged by springs hidden in ferns and in the little purple and red berries that spurt out their juices to the tread. Once a weka ran with a cry before the toe of Ike's boot; but, for the rest, in all the mighty length and height of the bush was no sound save the crashing of men through the branches.

"It's hot 'nuff fur another place 'sides this," said Mogger, wiping green slime from his eyebrows; "an' dark 'nuff fur ter lose anybody yer didn't want ter fin' agin, too. There's some folk one cud do wi' losin'—ef yer cud do it wi'out hurtin' their feelin's."

"It's never wise to think of another man's feelings," said Lou, beating the lawyer tangle aside. "You get underfoot each time you do it—and that is where the heat is bred, Mogger."

Through the bush-thickness he burst on to the track; and the others following saw him struck out in scarlet, like the demon in a pantomime. Below in the gully of pine and tree fern, a welter of flame galloped up to snatch at the way that led to Mains, and red tongues lapped the undergrowth, licking round the great trunks that barred them. The splash of raw scarlet was over the men with their startled faces; over the low sky behind the far hill; over the wild tracery of giant trees along the gully-rim. The snarl of it was in the air; fill-



ing the night with the clashing of falling branches, and the spitting of little springs, and the howl of the tall boles as they pitched downhill where the flames rioted. Flakes of fire blew up, settling softly in the darkness about the boys, and searing out the beauty of fern and creeper before they died.

A smother of smoke came on a sudden; black, choking and acrid. Murray buttoned his coat and turned his collar up.

"I'm only taking volunteers," he said, "for we'll have to run for it. Who is coming?"

Tod was fighting the blackness that stank of burning leaves and rottenness.

"Whisht, then!" he shouted. "Wud ye have us ahl tu Purgatory before our toime, Murray? There's a way back, yet, glory be!"

"And there's Roddy ahead with a loaded rifle," said Murray. "Are you going to let him get to Mains first? He's taking death for someone with him, by all accounts."

He tucked in his elbows, put his head down, and disappeared in the smoke. Ormond ran with him, step for step. Since the night in Pipi's hut, Roddy had been rather dear to Murray, and Ormond knew it, fearing what might be when Murray faced the boy next.

"He—may not do any harm, Murray," he gasped.

"But he will," said Murray. "You know it—unless we're there first. And I'd give ten

years of my life to be on any other errand than this, Ormond."

Ormond made no answer. For the smoke was tart on his eyes and on his lips, and his breath came uneven and laboured. Behind the boys fought, each according to his kind; choking, blackened, sweating; with curses; with Lou's light jokes, poison-tipped, to gall them; with light lips and staggering unconquered strength. The flames were very near. They singed away Lou's shirt sleeve and the hair of his arm. He ripped the burning thing off and ran on.

A shout from Murray blew back to them, and Steve interpreted it.

"He's sighted Roddy. Put yer back inter it, yer wasters. We'll nab him yet."

The smoke whirled up into a solid column that rammed the sky and seemed to split it. The whole lurid world beneath was struck out in reds; and Roddy ran down the narrow cleared track with the semblance of blood on his face and hands. Murray leapt after, with long strides. And Ormond alone saw the pain in his set grimed face.

The fire clawed at the track with long thin fingers; shrivelled, then clawed again. The sweat ran thick off each man, and ahead Roddy was reeling. Murray heard the breath pumping in his chest as he closed up.

"Roddy!" he shouted. "Roddy! Stop!"

Roddy wheeled suddenly, and the spit of a bullet past Mogger's cheek made him pause a moment to consider things. Lou chuckled, and Steve saw the reckless glee of his face.

"Shall we rush the young devil, Murray?" he shouted.

"No! Hands up, Roddy! You haven't a hope, you know!"

Roddy's hands moved over the stock uncertainly. His clothes were torn, and his young face was smudged with sweat and grime, and scored with lines that were new.

"Are you—goin' to hurt me, Murray?" he said hoarsely.

For an instant Murray's strong face quivered. Then his will took command.

"Very probably—if you don't sling that thing down, Roddy."

His finger crooked on the revolver trigger; but the rifle mouth covered him.

"Lie down behind there!" he shouted. "Now, Roddy!"

"I killed Art Scannell," said Roddy, paying out his words separately. "They will do something to me for that, won't they? Murray, will I swing for it?"

"I don't know. Hands up, when I tell you!"

"Murray, you wouldn't come arter me if I was to swing? I—I didn't mean it."

Ormond was biting his lips. His heart was

very sore for Murray; but he did not forget Art Scannell, limp as a new-killed chicken, in his arms.

"Hands up, or I'll shoot you, Roddy Duncan!"

Then Roddy's answer came in a right and left that sent the boys to cover where the smoke bellied and the young flames were waking. Tod made just one remark.

"Be ahl things," he said, "I'll not be takin' no penances from Father Denis this good while at ahl. Sure, they're comin' now tu the lot of us in a lump."

Ormond heard Murray's revolver crack in the new-come smarting dark; and he sprang with Murray to kneel on the thing that fought and bit and scratched, unseen.

Murray was sobbing in his throat.

"His shoulder!" he said. "Be careful, Ormond! I had to get him there. Roddy—it's all right, old fellow."

"Are they goin' ter hurt me? Murray—Murray! you're not goin' ter let them hurt me?"

Ormond, reaching for the fallen rifle, saw Murray stoop and kiss the piteous stammering lips. And it was not smoke alone that smarted in his eyes as he came to his feet.

"Come on, you there!" he shouted. "Who'll help carry the boy out of this?"

A hot blast poured over the track; with

flame in it, and raging smoke, and the roar of a falling tree. It silenced all other sound as half the boys swept forward down the road to Mains. Steve and Tod were halted by the tree and the man who was caught beneath it, and Ike fled after his mates with a face of pure wordless horror.

Little flames licked Steve's boot, and a puff of scorching air touched his cheek. He stood unmoving, while Tod, on his knees, tore at the branches in haste.

"Lou! Arrah, then, Lou! git away out ov that, before the fire has us aiten up entoirely! Lou! Is it dead ye are down there?"

Lou was pinned by the middle. He beat his arms free, and the gay grin flashed in the blue eyes, crushing down the mortal pain.

"Go an' chuck the earth out of its axis with a crowbar, Tod," he said. "For you'll do it before I'm out of this."

The tree was skeleton-white in a death of long years. But no power save that of the fire would move it where it lay athwart the track. Steve came to his knees.

"Tell us what ter do," he said stupidly. "We got ter git yer out, or the fire'll have us all, Lou."

A whirl-devil of fire spun along the tree, snatching at Lou's hair, and dropping sparks on his face. Tod swept them off, his light eyes wild with fear.

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"We'll pull ye," he cried. "Whisht, then, bhoy—git a howld of him, Steve!"

He wrenched the shoulders, and Lou struck at him, cursing:

"Don't, you ——! Let me alone! Ah-h!"

The sweat ran down his face, and Steve repeated, in a daze:

"Tell us what ter do. The fire's comin'."

The fire was on them; mocking, leaping, flinging cords of burning vine; and its shouting filled the night. Lou gripped Tod's sleeve.

"Have you got a knife?" he said. "Or a bit of cord? Put an end to me somehow! Don't leave me to be roasted alive!"

Tod shuddered down on the ground, stuttering.

"Ochone! Mary be good to us! Say yer prayers, then, Lou, for it's the hand of God howldin' ye, an' no other."

"Stop that blasted rot," said Lou, fiercely. "Haven't you got anything? Steve——"

His blue eyes were hard and bright and his voice grated. Under the smoke that all but smothered, Tod crept away, crazy with horror, and muttering prayers without end or beginning. Steve crushed out some burning leaves with his arm, and stooped lower.

"If I cud do anything—Lou; because as Maiden loved yer——"

Then Lou cursed him, in a fury of passion and pain. But there was no fear.

"Where's your knife? Your clasp-knife? You had it, I know! Give it here, then, if you've not got the mercy to help me out yourself. Give it here!"

"Lou—I—I couldn't! Oh—God——"

Lou tried to raise himself; fell back with oaths in his mouth, and twisted his hand in Steve's trousers.

"You'll burn too if you won't give it up. Steve—you devil!"

Steve dragged his belt round and jerked the knife out. He thrust it into the eager hand as a blast of flame struck his face, blinding him, scorching hair from eyebrows and eyelids, and sending him, stupid and staggering, down the track before the fire.

He found sense only by the post and rail fence that led by way of a creek to Mains. Behind the fire raged and tossed great arms, crossing the hill to North-of-Sunday. Before lay the peace of the night, and Mains homestead in the hollow. He stumbled down to the whares that were full of light and noise. In the door someone stopped him, exclaiming. Steve looked down at his boots, yet dazed. A spurt of half-dried blood crossed them both.

"Lou were quick," he said. "D—— quick!"

Then he staggered to the long table, laid his head on it and cried helplessly.

An hour later he was back in the township with Murray, knocking on the side door of the

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Hall and sending the gaping boy who came, for Maiden.

"An' you'll not tell her nuthin'," commanded Steve, standing gaunt and ragged without the light shaft. "Jes' ask her ter come a minit. Yer hear?"

The boy fled, and Murray spoke under the throb of the music:

"Plunk it straight, Steve. Let her know that you love her. It'll be all right, man."

"You think everything's all right 'cause young Art ain't dead," said Steve bitterly. "I got ter tell her 'cause I seed him last. An'—what will she say ter me?"

Murray went away swiftly as Maiden came out to say it. The flowers on her white dress were crushed; but the brightness was on her cheeks yet, and in her eyes. Steve spoke out of the dark, sick at remembering all that had gone by in the few hours since he saw her last.

"There's bin a big fire," he said; "a big fire. I comed back—we ain't all on us comed back, Maiden."

Maiden had stood in the door, panting, the smile yet on her lips. At his voice she moved suddenly, her hands shut close on each other.

"Steve—you're hurt! Steve, what are you speakin' that way fur? Steve——"

"I'm bringin' yer bad news, Maiden," said Steve, slowly.



He came forward into the light. His shirt was torn and charred and one singed arm lay naked to the shoulder. His face was white and drawn under the grime and the smudged smoke, and trouble showed deep in his eyes.

"I—couldn't help it, my girlie," he said. "Maiden—I did what I could."

"Steve—oh, what is it? Yer not hurt—bad? Steve! Tell me!"

"He weren't fit fur yer, Maiden. But he were game. Ter the very last he were game, dear. He—oh, why was I sech a blamed fool as ter think I could tell yer! I can't! I can't!"

Maiden sprang to him, holding him about the neck and never heeding his tattered shirt against her whiteness.

"Steve! You never killed no one! Ah! Not that! Not that, Steve!"

"Killed him! No, dearie! But—he's dead. Lou's dead, Maiden. He died game. I near died with him."

She leant back from him, her lips quivering between laughter and tears.

"And if you had I'd have never forgiven you, Steve. Steve, you silly boy! When you knew there was never anyone else but only you—only you!"

"Maiden! You never tolt me——"

"You never asked me, you mean," she said.

Steve took her up in his great arms, and in

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that moment the dead man out on the ranges was forgotten.

“Well; ef I ain’t bin a d—— idjit!” he said solemnly.

FINIS







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